

Common Unity Sermon Series  
Un-Divided – John 17:1-11  
Nov. 13, 2022  
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When I was planning this sermon series, I settled on the title “Common Unity” because it captures what we as followers of Christ should be striving for, and because it’s a cool take on the word “community.” But now, a few days after yet another round of contentious elections, I wonder if I should have called it “Unicorns and Sasquatches,” because right now those seem more real than unity does in our world. Look, my hope is in Jesus Christ, the one who calls us to unity, but this world sure does its best to challenge that hope. In so many ways, we are divided.

I wish the church was a beacon of unity in the midst of this division, but in some ways the church is leading the charge toward divisiveness. How can we model unity if we’re not unified? How can we show people what it’s like to disagree respectfully if we aren’t doing that? This isn’t a new phenomenon. Our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), was founded in part because of the divisiveness that existed in churches. In fact, one of our guiding statements is “Unity is our polar star,” which was a direct refutation of the state of the church in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Our denomination was the result of the combining of two different movements, one led by Thomas Campbell, and later his son Alexander, and the other by Barton Stone.

Thomas Campbell started his ministry in Scotland, and he was dismayed by the level of fracture and division he experienced in his native Presbyterian church. At one point, there had been so many splits within that denomination that you could be a Seceder Burgher Presbyterian, a Seceder Anti-Burgher Presbyterian, an Anti-Seceder Burgher Presbyterian, or an Anti-Seceder Anti-Burgher Presbyterian. Then, there was a further split among New Lights and Old Lights, which I don’t think had anything to do with the kind of candle wax they used in the sanctuary, but knowing how churches work, it wouldn’t surprise me. So, Thomas Campbell ended up serving the Old-Light Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterian Church. I bet he really hated it when people said, “Oh, you’re a pastor? What church do you serve?”

Campbell came to America and ended up leaving the Presbyterian church because they were denying communion to certain people. Campbell was fervent in his effort to bring more unity to the church, because that was what he believed Christ wanted when he prayed in John 17, “that they may all be one.” Thomas was joined by his son, Alexander, and while living in Pennsylvania, they started a movement called simply, “Christians,” because there should be no divisions within the body of Christ. Meanwhile, down in Kentucky, another Presbyterian minister named Barton Stone was struggling with the same issue about the chasms in Christ’s church. Stone was so upset that he also left the Presbyterian church and formed a group with the biblical name “the Disciples,” with following Jesus being the only requirement for membership.

So you have the Christians in Pennsylvania and the Disciples in Kentucky, and both groups shared similar beliefs about the importance of unity. So, they liked each other on Facebook and exchanged a few text messages – at least that’s what Wikipedia says – and decided they should join their movements together. Unity! So in 1832, on Main Street in Lexington, Ky., “Raccoon” John Smith of the Christians and Barton Stone of the Disciples shook hands and shared communion, uniting these two movements. Stone said that day, “let the unity of Christians be our polar star.”

Well, unity sounds great on paper, but it's is hard to live out among human beings who have actual opinions, which the movement found out very early on as they tried to settle on a name. Christians or Disciples? Both sides made their arguments with neither side willing to budge. Hence, we are the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Where there is not consensus, let there be compromise and a parentheses.

To be honest, the irony of having unity as our polar star has plagued us in our history. When our group was created in 1832, it was in direct opposition to the growing denominationalism that was splintering the church. In 1968, we gave into the reality that if it walks like a denomination and quacks like a denomination, it's a denomination. In that year, we stopped calling ourselves a brotherhood – I'm glad we stopped using that term for a lot of reasons – and acknowledged that we had become a denomination, the very thing we were created to oppose, an institutionalized version of Christ's church.

If that's not proof enough that biblical unity is difficult, this denomination which has unity as its polar star has suffered two splits in its history. One split created the Churches of Christ Acapella, and the other created the independent Christian churches. Unity may be our polar star, but this is a reminder that you never actually reach a star, you simply do your best to follow its guidance.

That's the paradox of unity: the more committed you are to it, the harder it is to live out. A few years ago, we hosted a dialogue on the political divide that exists in our country to see if we could find some common ground. We asked for RSVPs for the gathering and six people responded. One person said they were coming and five people said there was no way in Hades they would attend because they were afraid it would be too conflicted. And then 28 people showed up. We want unity, even if we don't know how to get there.

It feels like unity shouldn't be this hard. Aren't we all on the same team? Don't we work for the same boss? And yet, not only has the body of Christ divided into thousands of denominations, but churches split and congregation members are at odds over all sorts of political, social, and theological issues. That's why I think Jesus prayed for unity in John 17, because he knew how hard it would be for us to achieve. So, how are we doing? Are we united?

Well, that depends on what you mean by "united." On our American currency, you'll find the phrase "E pluribus unum." You know what that means, right? "Out of many, one." We are made one by virtue of being citizens of this country. Doesn't mean we have to agree on everything. Doesn't mean we have to like each other. Our oneness is not up to us; it simply is, by virtue of where our citizenship resides.

The same is true of our unity as believers in Christ. Unity is not an achievement to strive for; it's a gift we've already been given. We are united through our faith in Christ. Period. So while we can't earn unity, we can choose to live like it doesn't exist, letting ourselves be divided by things that are inconsequential compared to the love of God that unites us. But we have already been given the gift of unity through our faith in Christ. Doesn't mean we have to agree on everything. Doesn't mean we have to like each other. Our oneness is not up to us; it simply is, by virtue of where our spiritual citizenship resides. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, we are "E Pluribus unum." Out of many, one.

Here at Crestwood, we are one in the midst of our differing beliefs and ways we live out our faith. Unity is not intellectual agreement; we don't have to believe the same things to be united. Instead, unity is a shared witness, where we all testify to Christ's love for us in how we live out our lives, regardless of how we vote. Unity is often confused with uniformity, but those are very different terms. Uniformity is similar to homogeneity, but to seek unity is to seek

connection in the midst of our diversity, to recognize there is so much more that binds us together than separates us, and to pursue relationships with those not like us as a way to model unity in our fragmented world.

Well, if we are already united through Christ, we've got some work to do to change people's perspectives about what it means to be one with each other, and that change has to start with us. Joan Brown Campbell writes about unity, "The 'many' who must become 'one' speak different languages, come from different cultures, worship God in many different ways, and are separated geographically – yet are united by a communication system that gives us the play-by-play of war as it happens. We are united to mothers and children in Iraq and Afghanistan, to factory workers in China, and to the people answering our questions from the call centers in India."

If unity is still our polar star, and I believe it should be, then we have to acknowledge the human limits we have placed upon it. If unity were up to us, we'd only unite with people we like. The work of unity starts by admitting our unity has boundaries, and then having the courage to cross them, in Jesus' name. Psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham write, "It's more entertaining to watch people throw rocks at each other over a wall than it is to participate in the slow, difficult process of dismantling the wall and understanding each other's point of view." Through Christ, we are called to be people who dismantle the walls, not build them.

As impossible as it may seem to claim the unity we have been given by God, there is a way forward that we in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) can claim as our source of hope. It's the table. The table is the place where we are welcomed, in all our glorious, messy diversity – to sit down and share a meal next to someone that we might never associate with otherwise. When we hold the tray for someone, we are uniting with them through God's grace and generosity. But we're not only uniting with them. Through the bread and the cup, we are united with all who profess belief – and all who aren't sure what they believe. When we take communion, we proclaim once again that unity is our polar star, guiding us to seek and celebrate our commonalities in a world that highlights differences. Communion for us is, as one pastor said, "the world in a wafer."

Sometimes this concept of unity seems as unreal as unicorns and sasquatches. But Deitrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, "Christian unity is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality in which we may participate." If we are going to make it in this world, we have to acknowledge and celebrate the interdependence that binds us together as human beings. I am connected to you. You are connected to me. And we are connected to those around us, those like us and those not like us. If we forget that connection, then those not like us become Others, and the body of Christ once again fractures. To claim that "unity is our polar star" is not to claim we all have to be and believe and behave alike, but to say with confidence and compassion that we are the one body of Christ, bringing together our diverse gifts and voices and ways of believing for the purpose of glorifying God and making God's will known. It seems like, in our world today, we have forgotten a very simple truth. In God's eyes, there is no "them"; there is only us. *E pluribus unum*. Thanks be to God.