

We Are the Disciples Sermon Series
Unity Is Our Polar Star
April 21, 2024
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

One of the things that excited me about moving to Lexington 14 years ago was returning to an area of the country where people knew the denomination I served. During my eight years in a northern suburb of Chicago, I only met a handful of people who had ever heard of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). People would ask what I do for a living, I would tell them I was a pastor, there would be a long, awkward silence, and they would ask, “So, what...um...flavor of church is that?” I would say we were part of a denomination called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), there would be another long, awkward pause, and they would ask, “That’s not a cult, is it?” I would assure them it wasn’t, and then invite them to our next fellowship potluck and goat sacrifice. Actually, I’d give my 30-second elevator speech on who we are, which is really hard to do when most people who are Disciples don’t know who the Disciples are.

Understanding what it means to be a Disciple of Christ starts with tracing back to the roots of our denomination’s genesis. In this sermon series, we’re going to look at some of the statements which guided our founding fathers and use them as guideposts for understanding why we were created, who we were back then, and who we are today.

Today’s statement is, “Unity is our polar star,” which was a direct refutation of the state of the church in the early 1800s. Our denomination was the result of the combining of two different movements, one led by Thomas Campbell, and his son Alexander, and the other by Barton Stone. Thomas Campbell started his ministry in Scotland before moving to America, and he was dismayed by how much division there was in his native Presbyterian church. At one point, Campbell was leading a communion service in a Pennsylvania church. One family had traveled many miles by wagon to partake in this celebration. Unfortunately, they were Burgher Presbyterians and Campbell served an Anti-Burgher church, so by the rules of the church this family could not receive communion. Out of compassion, Campbell served them anyway and soon after left the Presbyterian church. In 1809, in his important “Declaration and Address” document, Campbell wrote that, “the church of Christ upon this earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.”

Meanwhile, down in Kentucky, another Presbyterian minister named Barton Stone was struggling with the same issue about the divisions in Christ’s church. Stone had participated in the Cane Ridge Revival, where upwards of 20,000 people gathered to hear preachers from a variety of denominations and share together in the Lord’s Supper, regardless of what flavor their specific church was. Stone also left the Presbyterian church and formed a group named “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. They liked each other on Facebook and exchanged a few text messages – I’m a bit fuzzy on this part of the history – and decided they should join their movement 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, joining these two movements. Stone said that day, “let the unity of Christians be our polar star.”

Well, unity sounds great on paper but 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 yet, this denomination which has unity as its polar star has suffered two splits in its history. Unity may be our polar star, but we haven't done such a good job of following it.

That's the paradox of unity: the more committed you are to it, the harder it is to live out. When we finally decided to call ourselves a denomination in 1968, in a sense we were admitting that the true unity of Christ's people is not an achievable goal. We will never be one, as Jesus had prayed. Instead, our focus shifted to working with others to do Christ's work, which we still do. We Disciples have an organization called the Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministry, whose goal it is to forge partnerships with other denominations and other faiths to witness to God's love and grace in this world.

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, because he knew how hard it would be for us to achieve.

I admit to struggling with this myself, especially when it comes to theological differences. I'm quick to judge churches that adhere to a different set of beliefs and interpretations of the Bible than me. This tends to be the case of larger churches, which skew more conservative and evangelical. When I met my wife Amy, she was attending one of these churches in South Carolina, Seacoast Church. It's ginormous, with multiple campuses and thousands of members. So, I assumed, based on past experience with large churches, they hated the people I loved and excluded the people I included. In fact, that assumption led to our first disagreement as a couple. Note: when dating, don't talk about religion or politics!

But then, I watched a few worship services, listened to some sermons from their founding pastor, Greg Seuratt, and read more about Seacoast on their website, and I learned that their beliefs weren't that disparate from mine. Sure, there were nuances of differences, but that would be true of any church. A few years later, I attended a retreat sponsored by Seacoast and ended up sitting across the table from Greg. I told him my story and then I apologized for judging his church. He said, "No one has ever said that to me before." To this day, if I need to hear a good word from somewhere other than Crestwood, I tune into Seacoast.

Unity among the body of Christ means we are one in the midst of our differing beliefs and ways we live out our faith. Unity is a shared witness, not an intellectual agreement. I hear the gospel preached at Seacoast, just as I do here. In contrast, I know a church here in Lexington that requires all its members and anyone who uses its building to sign a document stating they adhere to certain beliefs and teachings. But I didn't hear Jesus say that unity is based on believing the right things. Instead, he said that we are one as believers because he and God are one. We are united by God's love for us, not our ability to check all the right boxes on our spiritual inventory.

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.

There’s a group of folks here at Crestwood that crossed that boundary a few years ago. We had a Sunday School series where we welcomed people of different faiths to come and share with us about what they believed. One of those was Sudha from the local Sikh congregation on Swigart Avenue, and she invited us to worship with them. The next week, several of us traveled to their temple, called a gurudwara. As we entered the building, we were welcomed with wonderful hospitality and warmth. We put on the appropriate head coverings and made our way into the worship space. We sat cross-legged on the floor and as worship started, we had no idea what to expect. We just knew we wouldn’t understand a word of it because the whole service was in Punjabi, which was not a language I took in high school.

As worship started, the leader spoke a line, then the congregation repeated a line back. Hmm, feels a bit like a call to worship. Then, music played and everybody sang, kind of like what we do with hymns. Then, the worship leader took out a sacred book and read from it, just like we do every Sunday with the Bible. Toward the end of the service, a group of people – I’ll call them deacons – passed around a sweet, sticky substance for us to eat, and while it wasn’t a bread and cup, it sure felt like communion to me. And we concluded by sharing in the langar, a meal served to the community after worship. Dang if it wasn’t a good old fashioned church potluck! On the surface, there are a lot of differences between Sikhs and Christians. But if you pay attention, there’s also a lot we share in common. The key is being willing to pay attention.

Sometimes this concept of unity seems unreachably far away. 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.” Unity highlights the fact that, if we are going to make it, 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 a simple fact. There is no “us” and “them”; there is only us.