

One

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Third Presbyterian Church

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John 17:20-26

This past Thursday, in our noontime discussion group, we were looking at a portion of the Presbyterian Confession of 1967. We read this: “the arts, especially music and architecture, contribute to the praise and prayer of a ... congregation when they help (us) look beyond (ourselves) to God and to the world which is the object of (God’s) love.” When we take a moment today to recognize our ministry of music, offerings by singers and ringers, children, youth and adults, and support by many others, we recognize what a contribution to our very identity this ministry is. There are dozens and dozens of names listed in the bulletin, and we are grateful to all of them and for all of them, and especially those who provide such stalwart and faithful leadership – Jeanne Fisher, Caroline Robinson, Mary Ann Rutkowski and Peter DuBois. The hymn text quoted on this morning’s bulletin cover reminds us that God gave us music and voice not only as instruments, but as instruments of praise, and every time we exercise those instruments, the giving and receiving of those gifts, we enhance our worship of God.

You will also notice that today is the day we receive the annual Homes Offering. The bulletin describes how this offering is used – to support the important work of Kirkhaven and the Rochester Presbyterian Home. At various times over the decades, Third Church members have lived in these two fine places, and we have regularly had members serving on their respective boards. This offering provides support for programs that enhance residential life for those about whom God calls us to care in special ways, our elders. Give generously as you are able, and continue to keep the work of the Presbyterian Home and Kirkhaven in your prayers, and all those who work there and live there.

Since it is Worship, Music and Arts day, I would invite you to find hymn number 300. Let us sing the first verse: “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity will one day be restored. And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

That is Jesus’ prayer for us this morning. One.

Biblical scholars call this long section in the gospel of John Jesus' high priestly prayer. If you have a red-letter edition of the Bible, there is a whole lot of red here, and it is sometimes difficult to track. But it is crystal clear at this point. "I ask," Jesus prays to God, "...that they may all be one...The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

One...that the world may know God's love. What does that look like, and why does it matter?

I can tell you what it does *not* look like. Unity does not look like uniformity, and unity does not mean unanimity on every thing.

Today is Mother's Day. If Facebook is in any way a reflection of anything remotely real, today is a day that will be marked both by deep gratitude and authentic mindfulness. We are thankful for mothers and grandmothers, for surrogate mothers and mother figures of all kinds. We remember in particular – as I do this day – mothers who have gone before us, whose gifts and qualities and very love continue to abide and resonate. And yet we know that this day is not wonderful for all. Some have sought motherhood and not achieved it. Some have struggled in their maternal relationships, either with their children or their own mothers. Is there a way to express gratitude where gratitude needs rightly to be expressed, and a way to demonstrate solidarity and sensitivity where realities call for it? I think so, and perhaps no place better than in the church, where we seek to be one in the Spirit, and to live in a fashion of love deeper than any greeting card sentiment or single day recognition.

We held two memorial services in this place yesterday, for two faithful women, two mothers. Eleven children between the two of them, five and six. That's a whole lot of mothering, I'm thinking! And as we heard yesterday time after time, a whole lot of love. Never perfect love. Family unity never looking like uniformity, nor unanimity reached on every thing. Families disagree. Children are different. Parenting is never static and good mothers live in the fullness of their own humanity even as they are required at times to be superhuman. But we know what true unity looks like in a family, even if it is partial and fleeting and mostly aspirational.

This week, on both sides of the aisle, we have heard discussion about party unity. I hope so, not so much for the sake of either party, but for the sake of the electorate and the citizens the parties are created to serve. Even then, we know practically and philosophically that unity will not mean uniformity or unanimity. Nor should they. Debate is good when debate is good. But I do hope that the parties themselves, and the presumptive candidates (haven't we heard the word "presumptive" a lot these days!?) can find ways to help us live into a more perfect union. Maybe we can't expect love here, but a little respect and civility will go a very long way.

Last Sunday we ordained and installed church officers. One of the ordination questions asked our newest officers if they pledge to “further the peace, unity and purity of the church.” That’s a big one, and it has felt so elusive in the last generation of the church’s life. In 2001, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was at a real crisis point. We had been fighting about ordination and human sexuality for more than 20 years, with at least another decade to come. And we were fighting about what we believed, or didn’t believe (as some suggested) about Jesus. So the General Assembly, in its wisdom, called for a group to be formed that ended up being called the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church.

I was honored to be named to that task force. We worked for five years and presented our final report to the church in 2006, some ten years ago. We prayed then that it would not be just another church report to put on the shelf to gather dust. We do have short memories. Yet what I remember about that experience continues to bear fruit, and there will be times, including recent times, when people lift up that experience as a helpful one and a hopeful one.

Some argued that the balance between the three – peace, unity and purity – was impossible to maintain. Purity of theology automatically meant that unity would be compromised and peace would therefore be impossible to achieve. We said then what I have said about families this morning. Unity is not uniformity, nor does it imply unanimity on every thing. Whether it be at a local congregation like this one, where for example we do not agree at every point on how money is to be spent, or even what hymns we like, or a national body debating how our money is invested – or not – in the Middle East, we will disagree. We will not all look, or act, or believe alike. But how we disagree matters. Can we do it lovingly, and not divisively? Can we look at peace, unity and purity as three forces to hold in faithful balance, rather than three competing values that can’t be maintained? It is difficult. But it is more than an ordination vow; it is our Lord’s prayer.

The biblical scholar Lucy Lind Hogan writes of Jesus’ words that “It is a prayer that looks to the future. Jesus was praying not only for the people seated around him at table that evening but also for his future followers...I suspect that as the disciples gathered for what would be their final meal with Jesus (although they did not know it at the time) they did not feel like one. They were no doubt frightened, uncertain, insecure, scrappy, and squabbling.” Hogan writes: “To be a follower of Jesus is to be a part of a greater whole. Does that mean we all have to get along all the time? Does that mean we all have to agree **all** the time? If one thinks of this as a functional/political statement, it would seem to call for constant agreement and accord. But if one thinks more in (theological) terms then it becomes who we are. We are one in Christ whether we agree with each other or not. We are one in Christ whether we like one another or not. To become a part of Christ is to become a part of the community; a part of the one. Jesus’ prayer reminds us that our unity, our “oneness” is to be a sign to the world of God’s love for us

in Jesus Christ. Oneness and unity is about love. And if you have been a part of a family, a member of a church, or a community, you know that within that love there can be disagreements and squabbling. We are human. But the mystery of the incarnation is that God desired unity with us so much God became one of us. And in that moment we were drawn into the oneness of God. It is with God's help that we can live into that oneness."

When the sermon title was shared, someone asked me if I would be singing the song "One" from "Chorus Line." No, I very quickly said. No singing. No "Chorus Line."

If I were to sing this morning, and I won't, it would be a song from the band U2. It is also called "One." "We're one/But we're not the same/We get to carry each other/Carry each other."

We are one in the Spirit...and they'll know we are Christians by our love. Amen.