

“That the World May Believe”

Date: January 27, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Christian Unity Sunday

Theme: Unity, witness

Texts: Ephesians 4:1-16; John 17:20-26

Today is designated as Ecumenical Sunday, a celebration of Christian Unity. This afternoon there will be a service of Christian Unity at St. James AME Church, to which you are all invited. Whether you attend that service or not, and I hope many of you will, I thought it would be good for us at Lakewood to consider the theme of unity in our own service.

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer compared the human race to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter's night. Schopenhauer lived in the 19th century, but how well he describes our own time. He said, “The colder it gets outside, the more we hurt one another with our quills. And in the lonely night of earth's winter, we eventually drift apart and wander out on our own. And we freeze to death in our loneliness.”

Jesus was well aware of our need for human contact, intimacy and companionship. He was also well aware of the challenges and the “sharp quills” we face in the process. And so, in his final prayer to the Father, just before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus prayed for the unity of His Church.

Second only to his concern for his glory, was His longing that his disciples would be united. He knew how much super-natural help we would need in this area. Jesus also knew how a divided church would fail to bring him glory. He was afraid that our *lack* of unity would make it hard for others to believe our witness to God's love.

And so, Jesus prayed that we might be one, that the world might believe. If Jesus died to reconcile us to the Father and to reconcile us to

one another – the primary theme of the book of Ephesians – I wonder how Jesus must feel looking at the fractured and divided Church that bears his name today?

Sadly, disunity in the body of Christ has become a stumbling block for the world to believe. Many young people don't understand why there are so many different churches. How do you decide which one is true, or the *right* one to belong to? Disunity makes it hard for people to believe.

William Barclay, New Testament scholar and author had this to say about Christian unity: "As Jesus saw it and prayed for it, it was to be precisely that unity which convinced the world of the truth of Christianity. Why? It is more natural for people to be divided than to be united. It is more human for people to fly apart than to come together. Real unity between all Christians would be a super-natural explanation."

He goes on to say, "It is the tragic fact it is *not* a united front which the Church has ever shown to the world. Faced by the disunity of Christians, the world cannot see the supreme value of the Christian faith. It is our individual duty to demonstrate the unity of love with our fellow Christians, which is the answer to Christ's prayer." (end of quote)

People will be drawn to Jesus Christ when they see Christians practicing a kind of love that overcomes differences, that doesn't allow a disagreement to end a friendship, or to split a church. Jesus calls us to be United Methodist and not un-tied Methodists.

Jesus wants the Church, all of the churches, to be one, so that the world might believe in Him. Our conflicts and our divisions hurt our witness to the world. Jesus has already reconciled us to the Father and therefore, we are to be reconciled to one another, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Unity is given to the Church by Jesus. We don't earn it. We don't create it – Jesus has already done the work on the cross. We are called to model it; we are called to show it to the world. When Jesus is truly Lord of the Church, you will find unity. It is pride and ego and “needing to be right” that create the divisions in Christ's one, holy and apostolic church. It is the love of Christ which makes us one.

You know, it's easy to love another person when you agree with every opinion they hold. But it's a lot harder to do when that other person holds an opinion that is different than yours. Too often in the church we get angry with people who don't think or believe the way we do.

Sometimes our anger explodes. But many people believe you shouldn't get angry, and so they give the person the silent treatment and simply ignore them. “To heck with them; who needs them anyway?” Honestly? Christ does.

That so-called enemy is your brother or sister in Christ. Jesus loves that person, and He tells us to love that person. Conflict and disagreement will put our love to the test. But it was Jesus' prayer that we all be one, so that the world might believe in Him.

Our differences, our conflicts, our hostilities, our silent treatment – all of that creates a huge barrier for the unbeliever. They might say or think something like, “Why do I want to become a Christian? All they do is fight?” Jesus prayed that we might all be one, that the world might believe. Our lack of unity hurts the Body of Christ.

In less than a month, delegates from all over the world will come together for what is known as General Conference; it is the only decision-making body which speaks for the entire United Methodist Church. Their

primary purpose is to resolve a 40-year old debate concerning the treatment of persons who identify as homosexual.

United Methodists, good people, are on both sides of this issue. And actually there are more than two ways of looking at this issue, so there are many different opinions represented at General Conference. Next week, I will begin a study group on Monday nights to discuss a book and review these various opinions.

Yes, we will be having a conversation about this issue on which Christians disagree. It is my hope and prayer that as we have this conversation, we can allow the love of Christ to pervade all of our discussions. We may disagree, but we do not need to be disagreeable. It is my hope that we can model for the world conversations where people disagree, but still respect and even love each other. *That* is Christian unity.

Christian unity does not mean that we have to think exactly alike. For some people, I am sure, they would like everyone to think and believe just as they do on every doctrine and issue. But I don't think that is what either Jesus or Paul had in mind.

Unity is nearly always held in the midst of diversity. It is a bringing together of many ideas, perspectives, personalities and thoughts around a common, unifying concern or theme. There is a lot of room for variation of opinion and feeling when one is seeking unity.

One cynical person said, "Heresy is what that other church down the road believes, that we don't." Sadly, that is a my-way-or-the-highway approach. It is not what Jesus prayed for, or Paul preached.

There is a quote that is often attributed to John Wesley, although scholars have not been able to find it among his writings at all. Some think it may have originated with St. Augustine. This phrase comes much closer

to what I think we are called to do and be: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity (or love).”

For Christians, Jesus Christ is what is essential. When we hold fast to Him, we can agree to disagree about many things. A story:

During a frightful storm in the Georgian Bay of Canada many years ago, a ship was wrecked. Many perished. The mate, with six strong men and one timid girl escaped in a boat. But the waves were high and the craft turned over and over until, one by one the strong men lost their hold and disappeared beneath the angry billows.

The mate, however, had lashed the girl to the boat, and thus she was about to stay united with it. She drifted to shore where she was found cold and exhausted, but safe and unharmed. When the stalwart men went down with shrieks of despair, she alone was saved.

She didn't escape by her skill or wisdom. She was able to escape because she was fastened to that which would not sink. Beloved in Christ, here in this house of worship, we fasten ourselves to that which will not sink. His name is Jesus Christ. We find it in our unity with one another, but even more so, in our unity with Jesus Christ. If we are all bound to Jesus Christ, then we will remain bound to one another.

We Christians need to learn how to love one another, even when we disagree. We United Methodists need to learn how to love one another, even when we disagree. Sometimes our disagreements are huge, and emotional. But it is our love, which comes from our love for Jesus Christ, which will win the world for Christ. “They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love.” May it be so. Amen.