

June 25 2017

Reading from the Bible Ephesians 4:1-6

John 17

The setting for this Scripture is the Upper Room where Jesus was meeting on the night when he was betrayed. He had already participated in the foot washing. He had talked about the Holy Spirit. He had told them a couple of times that he was going to leave but that the Holy Spirit was going to come. He also told them that the world would hate them just as much as the world hated him. Jesus reminded them that their sorrow would be turned into joy and there would be peace in their hearts. We start with verse 1.

Sermon “Be One”

Jesus saw the disciples at their best, not as they were. He wanted them to be in unity, in oneness, and be one with each other like God, the Father and Jesus are one. Jesus said “I came from God the Father and I will now return to the Father.” There is this relationship that is true and loving. The Holy Spirit will connect with these people with that understanding.

So what is the unity concept all about? Is it a sort of Communistic Socialistic principal of the One World idea- or the One Church idea? Is it trying to put people together who enjoy the Latin chant with those who sing Kum ba yah, and they would all sing together.

How could we be one? As I said about the United Church of Christ, I have this vision of the black people in the Congo coming into the white people’s church in Connecticut. The white folks would be looking around at their black brothers and sisters who were singing wildly, loudly and emotionally at a western revival.

Those very well educated Christians saying, “What is going on here, are we to be one with them?” Those ideas can be difficult.

At the beginning of the 1950s, people in church organizations worked on a project from top to bottom with the idea of let’s pull everybody together. The United Nations and the World Council of Churches was started along with other projects to show the world that there didn’t have to be divisions. Now we had all gone through World War I and World War II and it seemed that religion had muddied the waters in a lot of ways. And about 15 years ago the UCC did a splendid but strange merger and tried to put together a model of a church organization; however that model didn’t really succeed. I think that maybe it wasn’t all that God wanted. I have friend who said, “Together we are better when we reach out the hand of friendship to other denominations.” He started a youth center in Greybull, Wyoming. He is an ordained Missionary Alliance pastor. And he was the first

person outside of the church to call on me when I arrived in Greybull. He welcomed and let me know his church people liked to do things together. He didn't try to get the Presbyterian church to join the Missionary Alliance but we did a lot of things together not unlike what this church does with the Lutheran and Catholic churches. Together we were better.

It has been said that denominations are an abomination to God. Well I am not so convinced of that, people have different ways of thinking and doing things. Some people are more causal in their worship; some want a high church literacy and some are more naturally private in their worship. Can they get together? The Presbyterian church government is theological with all things done in decency and in order. Is that any better than an independent Baptist church? Can the Baptist Church be so independent that it can't get along with the Baptist denomination? You laugh! I was in a chaplain's program with a pastor from that type of church He said, "I am so fundamental I won't belong to just any Baptist Church." Is one better than the other? I don't think so- I think their congregation loves Jesus just as much as you do.

The Scripture said, Jesus was in the upper room and he was called the high priest and was interceding for not only for the people that come to him also for all those who would come later. Jesus said. "Love one another as I have loved you." Be a servant of one another. Remember me I have chosen you, you haven't chosen me. Abide in my love." Jesus doesn't say, I am in and you are out. One of the disciples' mothers asked if her son could have the seat of honor when he got to heaven. Was he disqualified? Jesus didn't say that. Jesus said, "There has to be no sense of seniority among you." Thomas was missing on that first night after the resurrection. Jesus didn't say, "Sorry Thomas, too bad." Jesus said, "I wanted you to be together in one place." "Too bad." Peter and the group went fishing so all of them went fishing. The disciples were slow to catch on. The Bible said-they were slow, sluggish and hard of heart in understanding Jesus' message. Remember Peter opposed Jesus and said, "The Messiah would never have to suffer." but Jesus said, "Get behind me-Satan."

The early church had problems too. Paul's wrote lots about that. He wanted unity in the church. Some of the believers were divided. Some were say they liked Apollo (another preacher) vs Paul. Some said, "I like Apollo preaching better than Paul. Another issue was, they would eat their big meal and let the poor eat what they could find. After that they would come together and to have communion together. Paul wanted them to get over such problems. And at the big church counsel at Jerusalem there were divisions. Paul chastised Peter because he wouldn't eat with Gentiles. There were struggles in the early church even as there are struggles today.

My Mom tells the story about the First Christian Church in Davenport which she attended for years. It had been closed for a long time when I was growing up. But this was her story and maybe it was mythological, I don't know. She said the beginning of the fight which eventually led to the splitting up of the church started when they couldn't decide what to serve at a congregational dinner-- turkey or ham. I suspect that there were other issues in that church but they were torn apart. They closed and they were never a church again.

Jesus had diversity in his group. There were fishermen and also those who wanted to overthrow the government. He had Judas who John called a thief. He had the Sons of Thunder. Just imagine what kind of men they were to be called the Sons of Thunder. Some were married and some were not. Some were quiet and some were always putting their foot in their mouth all the time like me. Jesus didn't start out with diversity but as the group grew there was even more diverse. Then there was the woman at the well, and there was Mary Magdalene and later his brothers and sisters who were converted after his death. There were Greeks who asked about Jesus and there were Jewish church leaders and others. Jesus knew that unity was not in being unanimous it was not in being cookie-cutter Christians but in being the people that you are.

As I have been reading about the UCC the unity in our diversity you would be surprised by the diversity in the church if we sat down and visited and worship with them. You would have some interesting experiences in the School of Religion. But the center of believing is in a listening attitude and in loving others that don't always love you. It would be in loving Jesus and loving others as Jesus has loved you. We need to rest our own testimony with someone else's.

Sometimes you have to sacrifice because of the differences of people. Paul talked a lot about that. We are to have unity wherever possible with other Christians wherever possible is evidence in our church, in our bible studies, and in our Lenten series. I tell my friends, they are amazed. I tell them there are three churches involved for 30 years. They are astonished. We offer the other pastors, our friendship, our leadership and we still have soup and bread and we still come together. And VBS is another example. I thanked all of those of you who helped. I saw Marshall and several others of you who came and it was fun to work together. There were children from the Lutheran Church and also from the community. Do we support that? Do we feel jealous that the Lutherans had over 86 kids? No We share it. It is about attitudes, support and saying yes more often than no. As this church says, "That they may be one in spirit."

As I have been reading about the UCC church I am impressed about how people have stepped out and that is part of being one in the spirit. I am thinking about the events in the Civil Rights movement. The motley group of people sitting outside the courthouse was congregational people. They were our ancestors in the

denomination and they fought for the right of the blacks. The protest by the Congregationalists went all the way to the Supreme Court and the church folks went with them all the way. It all began in 1846 when the AMA-(American Missionary Association was formed. It was a Protestant-based abolitionist group founded to abolish slavery-educate American Americans- support racial equality – promote Christian values-and was sponsored by the Congregationalist churches.) I knew about Civil Rights Movements in the 60s and the 70s but I didn't know how many people from the United Church of Christ were involved in the movement. I didn't know way back then before and after they were free that there were different denominations involved in helping the black to read. Long ago, after the Civil War, the freed slaves were anxious and they came by the thousands and they often walked miles because they knew that education was important. And it all came around the circle in the 50s when we went south, crossed that line to help them get education again and the right to vote. I just assumed growing up in Davenport and not knowing what it meant to not be able to vote. I voted as soon as I could vote. My sister and I voted all the time and we felt it was no big deal. I never thought about not being able to vote. In the past the UCC church worked with people in all denominations to educate the blacks so they could go before the board and pass the civic test. How bad was it? A professor went to take the test and he could read the Constitution well so they gave it to him in Chinese so he would fail and not be able to vote. The people in the background to work together to help the blacks. But one teacher was lynched and another woman was sitting in her office, they shot a gun and started the school on fire and she barely got out of the building. People didn't like what the church people did. They looked down on giving the blacks an opportunity to be full value human beings. There are many stories but what amazes me is the courage of these people. The KKK (Ku Klux Klan was actually organized to stop the education of the blacks. One of the things that the UCC folks and others the best was to teach the blacks to read. They didn't make any money. But their witness today is in the real courage in their heart. The courage they had and what they felt in their heart that God wanted them to do. They became a witness to others. Would you believe singers went on tour and they sang spirituals? Women in the 1900s learned how to nurse and they became qualified nurses and started hospitals- the Deaconess. They worked with the mentally ill and teaching.

Unity comes in a lot of different ways instead of saying we all believe the same things. Because even back then there were differences. And I think in ending the sermon and ending the Scriptures that when Jesus prayed that they may all be one in the spirit. One of the key phrases is in the essentials let there be unity in belief in Jesus Christ-in Salvation and in non-essentials let there be diversity and in all things charity. Let us pray-

O God draw your church together in one company of disciples following our teacher Jesus Christ in every walk of life. Help us to see the witnesses who have gone before us and have that courage that they had. Together witnessing to your love that others may see your kingdom and will turn to your love and it will change the world. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen