

“Putting the Unity in Comm-union”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
October 6, 2019**

New Testament Lesson: John 17:18-23

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 97:1, 6-9

In 1997, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America entered into full communion with one another. This means we can freely receive communion in a Lutheran church and Lutherans can freely receive communion here with us.

In fact, anyone who professes Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is welcome at Christ’s table in all churches of the PC(USA) denomination.

Prior to entering into full communion, Presbyterians and Lutherans could share most anything else liturgically, including the ashes of Ash Wednesday. But they could not share the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

This caused Presbyterian preacher Jack Stotts to share in a sermon an observation of a Lutheran colleague who said, “How strange it is that we can share the ashes of death, but not the bread of life.”

We’ve come a long way in worshiping and ministering alongside one another as Christians from different denominations. Sadly, that’s because we’ve had a long way to go. The divisions of liberal and conservative, high church and low church, eastern and western, Protestant and Catholic, and traditional and contemporary have done precisely the opposite of what Jesus intended for us, what he prayed for us.

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus is preparing to depart from his followers and return to God the Father in heaven, and he stops to pray for them – for us – saying, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Jesus prayed that we would be one in Jesus Christ, and thus, one with each other, so that the world would believe in Jesus Christ and come to know and love God through him.

Sadly, today we are still struggling to live into that prayer. We are still trying – and too often failing – to overcome differences, differences as individuals alongside one another, differences as states and communities, differences as nations and races, and differences as churches.

What are we supposed to do about all these differences? Oh, and I'm not talking about good and healthy differences, differences that complement one another. I'm talking about divisive differences. Differences that cause us to mistreat and belittle one another, fear one another, go to war against one another, and even undermine one another in what otherwise would be – and should be – our common purpose, as revealed to us by God.

Christians and the churches they belong to are supposed to work hand-in-hand in common purpose. States and communities are supposed to work to strengthen one another, even as they offer different lifestyles for different people. Nations are supposed to work together for the betterment of humanity, the planet earth and even outer space.

And churches..., churches are supposed to lead the way by bringing individuals together in the Spirit of Jesus Christ to enjoy and build up the kingdom of God, through the body of Christ, which is the church.

One of the biggest and most important divisions in society today is the division between people who join together in a Christian community to love and serve the Lord and those who don't. They don't want to have anything to do with us. And, too often, we as individuals don't want much to do with them, either – at least not if it means stretching ourselves to share what the church has to offer them.

This church has a lot to offer our community – the Young Life Club Night this Tuesday, LOGOS on Wednesday, and the Open Table gathering on Home Repair Resources and Winterization on Thursday. If only we would be bold enough to reach out to let them know.

If we don't find a way to reach those who don't know us, who don't know what church is really about, don't know how Jesus lives and works through a community of faith like this one, then how are they to ever know? All they get is what they hear on the TV, see on the Internet, experience in their families and neighborhoods. All they see is that life is stacked against them and nobody cares.

It's just not true! We care! We have ministry programs that truly meet the needs of people out there in our community. We invest a lot of time, money and energy in these ministries. And we do this for no other reason than to show that God loves them and cares for them and is here to help them. If they only knew. If we would just reach out to them and tell them.

And we do. Our committees do all that they can to publicize our ministry programs. And we hope and pray that it doesn't fall on deaf ears, that it breaks through the clamor of disillusionment and anger, abuse and neglect, prejudice and injustice.

Truth be told, it takes more than our committees to break through the noise. It takes each and every one of us joining together and putting ourselves on the line to touch at least one person who is receptive to and in need of God's love, and mercy and provision. Who that is in your life, God only knows. And it is my prayer that God will reveal that person to you. Let us all join in praying as Jesus prayed for us, as recorded in the Gospel According to John.

As we conclude our sermon time today, let us take moment to pray. Jesus prayed to God saying, "... For their sakes, I sanctify myself (I give myself over to your will and purpose, O God), so that they also may be sanctified in truth (so that we who know and love Jesus may be more like Christ). I ask not only on behalf of these," prays Jesus, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.... ... So that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them, even as you have loved me." That is Jesus' prayer.

So, let us all leave this place praying that God would show us who in our lives – who along our path this week – needs to experience and receive the love of God, and just might be open to have that happen through one of the many ministry programs of your church, through someone like you, who is bold enough to come alongside them, that they may come alongside us, and experience God's love and acceptance, God's blessing and provision. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Your love, O God, knows no bounds. We gather here, neighbor and stranger; friend and – God forbid it, sometimes foe; young and old and middle aged; eager and enthusiastic and tired and resigned.

All these differences, Lord. Each of us with different needs, different responsibilities, different interests and commitments.

Yet you call us to be united as one – not in all aspects of our lives – but certainly in the most important aspect, in our love of you and our commitment to sharing your love with others.

Where we struggle with this, we pray that you would strengthen us in common vision and purpose.

We pray for those who need to feel and experience your love and care, and especially for those struggling with illness, a lack of adequate housing, the security of steady income.

As we pray this for others, remind us, Lord, of the blessings we have received – those tangible assurances of your love and care for us – and help us to reach out to those who don't yet know the joy and comfort of a faith community like ours.

We pray all this using the words that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**