

“...*All* Unity...”

John 17.20-23 (& Proverbs 9.1-6)

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Writing this sermon on unity proved to be more difficult than I originally thought. I wasn't sure as to why that was. Pressure, expectation, the thought of torturing you all with a jumbotron-size close-up of my head... maybe but probably not.

In the midst of praying and studying, writing, throwing away, and re-writing, I wondered why it was difficult, why it was hard. Eventually, I discovered what it was, and it is this: preaching on unity is hard because *unity* is hard. ...*It's hard*.

Unity is difficult, inconvenient. It is difficult work that rarely materializes *fully*. Therefore, any attempt at a convenient or *safe* unity is in actually no unity at all.

I think the founders of this Restoration Movement of “Christians” and “Disciples” were unaware of just how difficult this unity business would be. They may have been a *bit* optimistic with their millennial aspirations for a Christian union that would usher in the reign of God fully in our midst. But these first restorationists eventually realized the difficulty at hand, since this unity movement split four times since its inception.

Unity is hard work, inconvenient. Unity is hard because unity *as such* is not always good. That's right! I say it: unity is not always good. Now, I know I just uttered the Disciples equivalent of heresy, but there it is! Unity is not always a good thing! You see, unity is in itself neutral. It can be good or bad, or worse yet, it can be bad disguised as good. Unity is not always a good thing!

And in the name of this so-called unity, we Disciples have not only shined; we have also sinned. In the name of this safe unity, we Disciples ironically have been divisive.

Just ask the first Native Americans with whom the first Disciples came in contact. The way the Disciples story is typically told, it would seem that early white-Native contact was minor, if not non-existent. Yet, the bible scholar Jon Berquist of Disciples Seminary Foundation once reminded me that the Cane Ridge revivals were conducted in the *third* most spoken language in that area at the time, that is, English. At the year 1800, at the time of the revivals, more people in that part of Kentucky spoke Cherokee and French than English. (Talk about privilege!) One

need only go to scenic Bethany College in West Virginia, where our Disciples Historical Society is lodged, to find several sermons that Barton Stone wrote *in Cherokee*.

Yet, why no Cherokee Christian Church? We had much contact with Cherokee and other Native and First Nations peoples in those early years, *when the zeal for Christian unity was at its most intense*. And yet, one wonders why we don't have any noticeable Native leadership early in the movement.

To be brutally honest, it was because our contact with them was less than Christian, because we didn't include them in *our* unity, in our convenient, safe unity. Because we were part of the systemic extermination that eventually led to the Trail of Tears and other displacing atrocities. We operated with a notion of unity informed by a "doctrine of discovery," deformed by the nationalism of Manifest Destiny.

I thank God that a resolution denouncing "the doctrine of discovery" is before us at this assembly. But this is only the *beginning* of our confession of sin.

True unity was too hard for us and so we opted for a safe unity. And in the name of this safe unity, we Disciples ironically have been divisive. Since after all, any attempt at a *safe* unity is in actually no unity at all.

Just ask the first African American Disciples, some of whom were there at the beginning, experiencing the revival fire at Cane Ridge. The Black evangelistic effort of these first Disciples was relentless and fruitful, giving Walter Scott a run for his money, and leading to sizable growth among African Americans. Black evangelists, like Alexander Campbell (yes, there is another Alexander Campbell in our history), ignited the restoration fire and helped plant churches everywhere their feet trodded.

Yet, even before the first battles of the Civil War lit the night sky, many of the White counterparts to these faithful Black Disciples remained silent in the face of slavery. Although Campbell (the *white* Campbell) and Stone denounced the practice, they opted for a *safe* unity, ignoring the wounded hands and wounded feet of their African American counterparts. In the name of the cross, they turned a blind eye to the lynching tree.¹ This is what *safe* unity looks like.

This safe unity by white Disciples led many faithful saints to leave the fold in the last years of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th. Rev. Dr. Timothy James, aptly likens this loss of Black leadership in Disciples to a "mass exodus."² And a mass exodus it was. Even as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Merger Agreement, let's not forget that this "mass exodus" is the reason the great Preston Taylor started the National Convocation in the first place, that is,

¹ Cf. James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011).

² In personal conversation.

to stop the mass withdrawal of faithful women and men who were drawn to the Disciples message of unity but were met by its absence in practice.

Others, like the brilliant Samuel R. Cassius, didn't leave the whole Restoration movement; instead they opted for the less-connected Churches of Christ, so that they would not have to deal with the institutionalized racism in the trans-congregational structure of the church. The eery indictment of Cassius haunts us still, when he criticizes his white colleagues who

“preach about the goodness of God, and pray about loving one another, and being one in Christ, but... [who] scorn me on account of my race and color, and [who] tell me that their people will not tolerate me as an equal...”³

True unity, in our racialized reality, was too hard for us, and so we opted for a safe unity instead. Yet, safe unity is no unity at all.

Just ask the Chinese at the end of the 1800s in Portland and and Japanese Disciples during World War II. Xenophobic policies in government, materializing in the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Internment of Japanese American citizens during World War II, were met, in many places in the established church, by silence or indifference.

Safe unity is no unity at all.

Just ask the Hispanic communities in Texas in the early 20th century, who time and time again, historian Daisy Machado reminds us,⁴ were refused the funding needed to plant new congregations.

Just ask theological conservatives who have been the object of our ridicule, even from General Assembly stages, instead of being treated as faithful partners in theological exploration and debate.

Just ask the LGBTQIA community, whose intense love for Jesus is somehow insufficient enough, in some parts of our movement, to qualify them for the work of the church. I confess before you all that I am among those who for years denied their call, and when I accepted it, I remained silent, choosing instead *safe* unity.

Just ask women, not of yesteryear, but women today, who still—*still!*—are passed up for men—*still!*—in the so-called big-temple, prestigious congregations, even when they are often more qualified than their male peers for such a charge.

Just ask... Just ask... Just ask...

³ Quoted by Lawrence Burnley, in *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (2013), 50.

⁴ Cf. *Of Borders and Margins : Hispanic Disciples in Texas, 1888-1945* (2003).

In the name of this safe unity, we ironically have been the source of division. For safe unity is no unity at all. [PAUSE] In fact, this safe unity kills. It is a safe-yet-deadly unity.

The truth is: unity is not always good. Now, I know, it's heresy for a Disciple to say that. But the greater heresy is division parading as unity. As the great Preston Taylor declared, such misuse and abuse of "unity" is "the heresy of all heresies."⁵

[PAUSE] So... where do we go from here? Should we give up on this unity business altogether? What now shall we do?

Well... the unity question is only the first question we Disciples must ask if we are striving to be one. There's a second unity question that must be raised. And it is this: What *kind* of unity are we to live into? That is to say, what is the *nature* of our oneness? What is the *ethic* or *posture* from which we strive to be one?

Herein lies the good news of our scripture this evening. (There's good news! With God there's always good news.)

Christ's prayer for the Church isn't simply for any kind of unity. It is for a specific kind of unity. Hear again parts of our Gospel reading this evening:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. ...that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity ..."

As we just heard, the unity Christ prays for is demonstrated in His unity with God, whom He calls "Father," Therefore this second question--what kind of unity...?--is unavoidably bound to yet another question, and that is: "Who is this Christ who is united with God and who unites us to God and each other?" You see, for John the Evangelist, ecclesiology (who the Church is) always corresponds to Christology (who Christ is). In other words, to get at the unity Christ prays for, we need to know something of the Christ who prays for our unity.

Now, the Church historic heavily read this scripture and deployed it to develop what would become the doctrine of the Trinity, the belief that God the Mother (a term that some of the Church Fathers *did* in fact use, it is not some "modern, liberal distortion"⁶)—that God the Mother and God the Son are one, that they are (at our scripture reads) "in" each other. They indwell each other, and share and receive completely from each other.

⁵ Taylor's speech at the inaugural meeting of the National Convocation (1917), quoted in Sandhya Jha, *Room at the Table*, 37.

⁶ E.g. Gregory of Nyssa.

Now I am not here to endorse this doctrine of the Trinity, as beautiful as this image of a relational God may be for some of us here. We Disciples have never required its affirmation for fellowship. And I for one don't want to start that now.

Moreover... when one reads John's Gospel, one recognizes that this doctrine is not *needed* to demonstrate how John establishes the unity between Jesus and God. You see, John tells us clearly how such a divine-human unity is realized. A bit earlier in the Gospel, *on several occasions*, Jesus says that his unity to God is to be proven or seen "by my works."⁷ To understand his unity to God, Jesus says, "Look at what I'm doing!"

To get at this unity with God that Christ embodies, and to which Christ call us, we need to look at *what he does* in the Gospel. And *what* does Jesus do to demonstrate this unity?" (Remember, we need to answer this to comprehend the unity toward which we are called.)

Well... do you remember *where* this prayer takes place? And to you remember what he is doing in this place?

[PAUSE] Right before his prayer for unity, Jesus gathers for a meal with his disciples and... he washes their feet. *We know by his works!* He washes feet.

And how about right after the prayer for unity? Where does Jesus go and what does he do? *After* this prayer for unity, Jesus takes up the cross. Christ's call for unity is bracketed by Jesus washing feet and by Jesus taking up the cross.

What kind of unity are we to live into? What is the posture from which we strive to be one?

Hear it is (if you're texting, stop and listen to this): Unity—*true* unity—requires service and sacrifice. No... better yet, true unity is *grounded in*, and *emerges from*, service and sacrifice. Between washing feet and taking up a cross: This is not *safe* unity; Christian unity is *dangerous* unity, *radical* unity.

The great Disciples minister from Utah, the Rev. Vinnetta Golphin, once preached an amazing sermon on the foot washing story, and brilliantly concluded that all ministry must be done "at foot level."⁸

No high pedestal ministry!

No greater than thou ministry!

No high and mighty ministry!

Ministry—true ministry—is done at foot level.

⁷ Cf. John 14.10,11. Dogmatic note: The Trinity focuses on who he *is*; John in these texts focuses on what he *does*.

⁸ Sermon preached at the installation service for Rev. Daphne Gascot Arias, Downey Memorial Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Downey, CA, January 18, 2015.

True *unity* happens at foot level. True unity is not easy. Dangerous unity is dirty. Radical unity smells like foot funk!

All the previously mentioned abuses and misuses of unity in our Disciples history have one thing in common (and here, I quote the Disciples ethicist Toni Bond Leonard⁹): In these safe versions of unity, we Disciples believed that some folks were not even worthy enough to have their feet washed. Yet Jesus demonstrates the contrary by washing the feet of both an imperial tax collector and an anti-imperial insurrectionist, by washing the feet of a betrayer and a beloved. In washing feet, Jesus acknowledged the humanity, the belovedness, of each and all.

Between washing feet and taking up a cross: This is not *safe* unity; Christian unity is *dangerous unity, radical unity*. This is why earlier in John 17, Jesus notes that his disciples will be hated by the world.¹⁰

Now the radical nature of this Christian unity requires some pragmatic nuancing here, especially light of our history of safe-yet-deadly unity.

Here's the caveat: Some folks (in our church and in our world) have been *forced* to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of a few and *forced* to serve those few—groups like women, African Americans, the poor, the undocumented, etc. So we must be clear as to how to speak of sacrifice and service.

Although I disagree with her theological conclusions regarding the cross, the womanist theologian Deloris Williams is right in highlighting all the ways that “cross”, “servant”, and “sacrifice” language has been deployed in the oppression of people, especially, she notes, of Black female bodies.

Yet the charge is not to *force* others to empty themselves for our benefit (which is oppressive), but to willingly and vulnerably offer ourselves, through Christ and by the power of the Spirit, for the sake of a broken, divided world.

The charge toward radical unity requires that the church as a whole, on its way toward unity, accept these historically rejected bodies, feet and all. The ecumenical summons necessitates that we simultaneously take up our cross *and* denounce the ways that our safe unities crucify people everyday. Hence, as theologian Jon Sobrino asserts, the charge to take up our cross paradoxically means that we help take the oppressed down from their crosses.¹¹

⁹ In personal conversation.

¹⁰ V. 14.

¹¹ Cf. *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Poor off the Cross* (1994).

This unity is indeed scandalous. You see, unity rooted in the ethic of foot washing requires that those of us pampered with institutionalized pedicures and systemic foot rubs be the first on our knees with a water basin and towel in hand. Radical unity requires, at this historical point in our church's life, that some of us sacrifice and serve *first* and *more frequently* than others, trusting that in this gospel act of reversal, we will find life—that here, we find the God of life, that “Illimitable Life” (to quote the medieval philosopher Boethius¹²) endlessly shared in love between God the Mother and God's eternal Wisdom, who took on flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

The paradox and promise of the Gospel is that whereas false unity is safe yet deadly, true unity is dangerous yet life-giving. You see, Church, the unity that emerges from a water basin has the power to cleanse us all, for it contains the “living water” that “never runs out.”¹³ The unity that is poured out from shared sacrifice leads to life everlasting because the world built on crosses, lynching trees and militarized borders is no match for the Risen Christ who shattered the very gates of hell!

Fellow Disciples, let us grow in unity by taking up our shared basin and towel, and let us wash feet—

the feet of the homeless family, whose feet are weary from standing on curbs in search of mercy;
 let us wash the feet of the Native elder, whose calloused feet tell the story of displacement;
 the feet of the undocumented worker, whose wandering feet are scorched by the desert sun;
 the feet of the gay teen who is contemplating suicide and whose feet are tired of running from bullies;
 the feet of Black mothers whose feet can no longer carry the ever-present fear that their children may not come home tonight.

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), let us take up our shared cross so that we may be one and truly live! And let us take up our shared cross by denouncing the world hopped up on crucifixion. Let us denounce...

...the cross of brokenness and bring wholeness in Jesus' name!
 ...the cross of despair, and dance in the joy of the Lord!
 ...let us denounce the cross of violence and strive for radical peace!
 ...the cross of hatred and extend radical embrace!
 ...the cross of division and stand in solidarity!
 ...the cross of fear and struggle in hope!
 ...let us denounce the cross of injustice, and toil for liberation!

¹² Cf. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

¹³ Cf. John 4.13.

...let us denounce the cross of oppression, and fight until justice “rolls down like mighty waters”!¹⁴
...let us denounce the cross of death and proclaim resurrection and life everlasting!

Beloved Disciples, it is between the water basin and the cross where we are truly made one in the Spirit.

And it is here, in this radical unity of the Spirit, where we find Jesus, a loving Jesus whose wounded hands wash our feet and whose wounded feet bear the marks of His love.

And in finding Jesus, in finding this wounded yet risen Christ, we find God, the God of “Illimitable Life” who ensures us that there is *indeed* life on the other side of our sacrifice.

¹⁴ Amos 5.24.