

## General Assembly – July 11, 2017

Assembly Required John 17:20-26

<sup>20</sup> “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, <sup>21</sup> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. <sup>22</sup> I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

<sup>24</sup> “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

<sup>25</sup> “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup> I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

Let me tell you some things I love. I love Jesus. I love the church. I especially love the Disciple church. I grew up going to JYF camp, Chi Rho, CYF camp, Jarvis Christian College for undergrad, Brite Divinity and Phillips Theological for seminary. I love DOC. Formed and informed by many of DOC churches. I’m learning more about love and more about listening from my newest love, 4 month old granddaughter, Ava Jo-Nan. Now I love her mom, my family, friends... But I have found a new depth of love in being grandmother to Ava Jo-Nan (6<sup>th</sup> generation member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)). I love my baby. **PICTURE 1**

Yet, sometimes I am overwhelmed by all the different voices that come from our past—present—future. How do we assemble these different voices into one message? How do we in unity toward sharing that message with others.

Forty years ago, Dr. Fred Craddock (Noted White Disciples pastor and professor). He taught us (the church) to whisper; today Rev. William Barber (noted Disciple pastor and National Social

Activist) is teaching us (the church) to shout. **I wonder who will teach us to pray?**

One other love that I must share today is how much I love God's word and especially the Gospel of John. Our text today is typical for John. The Gospel – that is the Good News – in the fourth Gospel – the central concern of John, the formation of an organic, complete community united under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Total, (incomprehensible) relationship with Jesus / the community of his followers (now and in future generations) / his Father. This fully devoted relationship is what John means by "love." It is by abiding in this love, sharing God's word and God's glory, and being completely one that outsiders may truly know / understand / realize that indeed Jesus was sent by the Father.

The vision of the community that abides in the unity of God's love is to be lifted up as a challenge to all followers of Jesus. **Will the outside world indeed see in us the love and glory of God?** Love, friendship, romantic, family the ones you choose or acquire, even church love is a challenge. Putting love together. Uniting with the other is hard.

**As hard as my grandmother imagining me standing here today.** My standing before you tonight was once unimaginable. My grandmother and mother for whom I am named are all Disciples and this was not possible for them.

That which was unimaginable for my 96 year old grandmother, my 77 year old mother , became possible – real – incarnational- for me! Now you can imagine it because I'm standing right here. The reasons why it was unimaginable are too many to unpack in the time I was given. They are numerous and complicated. But most of what we do is pretty complicated and so John's gospel becomes the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm, a lamp to our feet and a light to our pathway.

Jesus faced this difficulty, this challenge, this complication head on by interceding for us those whom God loves. In fact John 3:16 says it this way – For God so loved the world that God gave

His only Son... And then 17 chapters later that Son prays for us. It is the longest prayer that Jesus prays. Four times Jesus calls for unity in this prayer. Praying that out of that love we would be ONE. **We would be in Unity**

I imagined the scene opens up like this, (**get on my knees**). Jesus saying to the Father," he sighs, "I pray that they might be one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. And then, closing his eyes, clenching his fists, he prays with urgency, a more accurate reading of the verb tense is (hard to translate). My best attempt is "Let them be one, Father, *let them be ONE!*"

John's gospel is all about the word being made flesh, baby Jesus coming down to earth to take up our transgressions. Loved us so much he would end up dying for us. God came to dwell right in the middle of our messy, lovely lives. **God's word could have taken the form of a shout and could have taken on as a whisper but instead God assembled the word in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.**

It is complicated – unity, love, Jesus prayer for us to be one.

### **Transition**

The prayer is complex enough (full of tension), even convoluted enough, that we can forget that it is a **prayer.** What happens when we turn a gift into a directive? Critical question of tonight! What happens when we convert a prayer into a plan? It happened when my beloved city Memphis decided to stop being divided and come together as one? My friend Ryan asked a Memphis Historian "Why on earth would a great Southern city name its main street Union. "Oh Honey, she told him. It's not about the North and South... that just divides us more. Its about who we are now Union Avenue was the old boundary line that divided the city of South Memphis and Memphis.

So when I walk each morning from the parsonage through the parking lot to the Lindenwood Christian Church. I see 2400 Union Avenue and realize God wrote the call for the church in stone – “Union” Our unity as a church is not derived from an avenue but the prayer Jesus prayed and the unity of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We are the ones God entrusted so that the world will know God’s love. Beloved, whenever we think that we assemble unity through sheer force of will, we end up **breaking** something. It is a prayer because the source of unity isn’t a sermon, program, mission, or project—it is a gift. Yes, it’s a gift that comes in parts and pieces a gift that we must unbox and put together. Still, it is the gift of God.

**Sometimes we make it into a commandment:— Be one;** or more teaching – this time about his relationship with the Father; or even more promises – that they (the disciples and also us) will one day be where Jesus is going and share his glory. But at heart it’s none of these things. It’s a **prayer**. It’s the prayer of one person praying for others, others whom He loves—**praying for Mary and Martha, Peter and Andrew, and . . . Fred and Samuel . . and [Grandmother] and [Mother] and Ava Jo-Nan . . . and you and me. PICTURE 2**

The prayer is also a complicated challenge in itself. Convolutated at times – but what real love isn’t a winding challenge- that we are called to make sense of? In all of its beautiful complexities we can **never** forget . . . its still a **prayer.** **We know how to shout and we know how to whisper. But unity is a prayer we learn from Jesus.**

I have become obsessed with this vision of oneness in the church for a while. I have come to know more about the complication of this oneness as I serve as senior minister of a 174 year old Disciple church in Memphis, TN where I usually introduce myself this way. I am most beautiful and best tanned person to have serve in this capacity to date. In others words I am the first African American and first woman. I join with Jesus in prayer with the vison of oneness , “that they might be one.” What’s driving my prayer life is this 4 month old chocolate human who brings joy and

love to the church. She requires so much.

My most amazing role to date is Being the grandmother to Ava Jo-Nan. If you can't tell now I'm in love with this little human. She is a sixth generation member of DOC. Every item that belongs to her has these two words all over them, "**Assembly required**". We have been assembling rock in play, pack and play, breast pumps, Crib - assembly required. Musical mobile - assembly required. Bathtub - assembly required. Walker - assembly required. **(Some of the items we put together are not safe for her stuff animals) PICTURE 3**

It is incomprehensible all of what Ava will grow into by the time she is my age. And all that will need to be assembled along the way. **Putting** things together and keeping them together is complicated.

**This is the Critical Question tonight - What happens when you convert a prayer into a plan?** Assembly is complicated because 1) there are tons of pieces (prayer, listening, conveying...), 2) we don't follow instructions well and 3) we're not carpenters (but Jesus is. Jesus specialized in things that need assembling) ....**Maybe gather all the places where you say it's complicated and build church.** Stubborn thing built with metal and wood that thought they we're never meant to go together until Jesus got his hands on them.

1. There are tons of pieces to put together (prayer, listening...), - It's complicated
  - a. First time I held the baby – I had no idea that all of this stuff will need to be assembled
  - b. I remember my first church as youth minister – assembling lock ins, baptism classes, camps and conferences

## 2. We don't follow instructions well – It's complicated

a. Some of baby Ava's toys lean, some of the furniture isn't quite assembled to the specs given to us. We have done our best.. My daughter might start the project, then I get my hands on it.. then we get tired. And what had happened was.... Thank God for grace 😊

b. This same human behavior happens in our Church assembly. I love the Disciple church. I know I told you that already. Never in my wildest imagination would I have imagined a church that decided to look at the instruction manual for calling a pastor with the eyes of courageous faith – 2 years ago I was called to serve a 174 year old historic flagship church in Memphis, TN.

c. The night I was elected was the Charleston shooting (for me it was a spiritual eclipse). The first two years of this journey have been filled with the racial tensions as All lives Matter bring complication to Black Lives Matter. Try calling for unity in the skin I'm in.

d. The election season was moving towards the primary and the divisiveness of the US was showing up in our church... I found myself mediating church wars on social media that amounted nothing more nothing less than the worst of all **(pause)** whispering and the worst of all shouting. It was capable of splitting the church right down the middle. And our church like many churches is split politically right down the middle. We tell ourselves the lie that it stops at politics and history doesn't matter. Which is what we told ourselves in:

- In the late 1700s our founders and the Presbyterian church... right down the middle
- In the 1800s over slavery and it split us down the middle
- The movements of Scott and the Campbells.. right down the middle
- My great great grandparents sitting in the balcony split us right down the middle. We fought a war and thought it solved the problem.
- In the 1900s no place for women's leadership gifts, no place to preach and it split us right down the middle
- And even now

Grant Wacker a great church historian reminds us all every generation has their blind spots. I stand before you urging you to please consider what is our generational blindspot. What is our slavery? What is our balcony? What is our disunity, boundary... exclusion.. dividing force...wall? Whatever it is we can be certain it is our blind spot today, boundary tomorrow, that turns into a sin, broken part of our Assembly and Jesus is praying for us. Yes! Praying for the “Assembly that is Required.”

When Ava crawls out of her crib and walks onto this stage, when Ava steps into the pulpit of her future into this Assembly I love. If we only shout we will go deaf. If we only whisper we will never hear the “other”. But if we learn to talk the way Jesus talked, hear the way Jesus hears, and pray the way Jesus prayed perhaps we can be more intentional about creating space for all to assemble. We will hear the voice of God saying, “Assembly Require”

The disunity is real. Yet it was clear to me that the call for this local church in the heart of the Memphis, TN (known for Graceland with Elvis Presley and the Lorraine Motel where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King,Jr was killed). This church has a heart for the city for unity. Our very church address 2400 UNION. **Whoohoo!** However the complication of gathering the assembly weekend and week-out was necessary. Jesus prayer fuels our work and it was more than the Sunday to Sunday. It was the coffee conversations, elder and deacon prayers on Wednesdays, the bible study and small groups that serve as a mosaic from a myriad of backgrounds in the middle of the city, and it all came together for me in the hospital room when a 88 year old white faithful man with Rev. before his name sits in his wheel chair each Sunday and makes his way to encourage the preacher on her sermon came up to the hospital to visit baby Ava. He was redirected by many hospital staff. They knew us well after 25 hours of labor. And then nurse after the nurse told him that he was going to the wrong room that a Black family was in that room. He finally made his

way to Ava. Held her, grabbed my hand, I grabbed my daughter's hand and she grabbed his daughter's hand. He prayed for her, for us, for our church. **PICTURE 4**

I became more determine than ever to live into this prayer Jesus prayed... that they, us, we, you and I would be one. This assembly would create space for Ava to know that Oneness is possible. We have assembled a crib so that Baby Ava would have a place to sleep; My daughter and I will assemble a high chair soon so that Ava will have a place to eat; I believe we are assembling a church where Ava will grow to love Jesus and make the world better. The looming question I have is what function will the Church, The Assembly, play in her life? Is it possible that church is the most important thing we assemble for our children and grandchildren?

Each chapter of history does its best to tear us apart and Christ intercedes with us through this longest prayer that we might be **ONE**. . . so that the world along with Ava now that she inhabits this world might know that God sent Jesus . . . That God loved Jesus . . . and that as God has loved Jesus, so God loves the world . . . love Ava... and all of us

**I can feel Tension** why do we keep talking about unity... it's day four already of this

Assembly. I believe it is not the what of unity... it's the how Not the what of unity – “it's our polar star”

Not the **what** – Jesus prayed for it Not the what – we've been working on it It's the HOW

shall we assemble? How will it work now? How will it work in the future?

I love our church. Yet love is difficult ( in our families, in our culture, in our city, yes even in the church) .It's a challenge . It's hard .....divine love, human love, incarnate love – its complicated .....the way friends love and lovers love ... it's a challenge... all real love ... is complicated and challenging ... but Jesus tells us its worth it.

Jesus **prayer** becomes a plan for us.

- Reminded of the heart of our nominee Rev. Teresa “Terri” Hord Owens “Imagine the community of believers so committed to love of God and neighbor that we do not demonize differences as deficient but rather learn to listen to one in light of our diversity
- How will we live into the tension of these political times (Liberal, Conservative, Independents, Moderate)
- How will we honor the uniqueness of the racial communities that gather together because of their colonial, ethnic, cultural and historic connections and still embrace the General Assembly (National Convocation, Obra Hispana (Hispanic Work), NAPAD North American Pacific Asian Disciple,)
- How will we create space for the 6 generations of leaders (those who have been on the battlefield a long time, current leaders, struggling leaders, energetic leaders, the emerging leaders, and those not born yet?)

**So could it be that the HOW is simply to want it, to want unity, to add it to the list of things we so dearly love, and to never stop asking for it, to never settle for less than it, to not be satisfied with “us” and “them” in the church but only satisfied when we at last we have our prayers answered- and we hold each other's babies.**

I really thought I knew how to assemble what babies needed.. but it's been 25 years since I've done this. So I'm going to need your help. Let us assemble ourselves on our knees with Jesus, from Ava's cradle, to the church that is not yet been born yet.

I think most of us know– the goals of assembly is not to whisper that some can't hear or to shout to cut out others. The goal of the assembly is to live into Jesus prayer found in John 17. To assemble parts, pieces, people –so that the world will know **Amen!**