

“That They May Be One”

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Acts 1:6-14

John 17:1-11

“[Jesus prayed,]

‘And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world,
and I am coming to thee.

Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me,
that they may be one, even as we are one.” John 17:11

Let us pray... O God,

We pray that – someday, we will be ‘one’ – we pray that we will be *unified*,
but please don’t let us become the same at the cost of
losing who you created us to be. Amen

Did you ever see liquid mercury?

Dentists used to use it for making tooth fillings,
It is also called ‘quicksilver’ and when you try to touch it,
it splits into smaller pieces, all rolling around.

That was the same problem Emperor Constantine had
when he tried to make Christianity the state religion of Rome.

At the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE(AD),
the Nicene Creed was formulated for all the churches
to get on the same page – so to speak, about God as a Trinity;
But they couldn’t agree.

The Roman Church in the West said the Holy Spirit

‘...*proceeds from the Father and the Son*’

while the Churches of the Eastern Orthodox said
it was only from ‘*the Father*’ that the Holy Spirit originates.

So, instead of unity, the Church split in two, between the East and the West,
held together by the political will of the Roman Empire.

There is an earlier faith statement – that bypassed such stickier details,
said to have been composed by the original disciples themselves
and it is called ‘The Apostles’ Creed’.

Some of you have expressed a desire to use this creed in worship
and we say a variation of it in the form of the UCC Statement of Faith
when we receive new members.

If you know ‘The Apostles’ Creed’, you’re welcome to say it along with me –
a version used by the United Methodist Church:

Willard, p.2

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,

and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,

the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Other versions of the Apostles Creed have the phrase

‘He descended into hell’, which is either omitted – as in this case,
or changed to, ‘He descended to the dead.’

This was probably because it was disturbing to think of
Jesus having to go through hell.

I remember visiting a church when I was a seminarian

and a little boy asked me about that phrase,

and wondered why Jesus had to ‘[descend] into hell’.

And I told him that was so that no matter what human beings face,

Jesus had faced it, too, so there would be never be anyplace people go
where Jesus hadn’t been, too.

We would never be alone.

All that to say there is unity between Christians– though with variations
and thank God for that!

What if we all were the same? No variety, no diversity –

we would be stuck with what someone else said is the right way

and the only way to understand and worship God.

Actually, that will always be true to some extent – even with the UCC,

except as we convince one another that it’s OK to get out of the boat

and dance around with Jesus on the water, every now and then.

One thing that effectively unifies people is trouble –

and there is nothing like a shared catastrophe

to bring out the potential for cooperation.

Oh, it brings out the worst, too,

but what makes the difference in the long run is the ingenuity

born of the necessity to cope.

The greater the evil, the greater the good that must arise to overcome it.

Willard, p. 3

In our history as a denomination, we have seen four traditions unite,
though this happened in two phases.

In 1931, the Congregational and Christian denominations
joined together.

And in 1934, the Evangelical and Reformed denominations
allied themselves.

Though it would be simplistic to say there was only one reason,
this was a time when the world was going through the Depression,
which put tremendous pressure on congregations
to band together for survival.

They had to ask themselves what were the real differences
that kept them apart, and what were the similarities
upon which they could find common ground.

The shared values turned out to be Christ as the Head of the Church,
the Bible and historic creeds as a guide, and a democratic structure
for congregational decision-making.

After WW II and the revelations of the Holocaust,
the Spirit of Christian ecumenism flourished alongside
the initiative to establish the United Nations,
when the United Church of Christ was born in 1957.

This event brought together the Congregational-Christian churches
with those of the Evangelical & Reformed.

And the UCC has received immigrant Christian communities like those of
the Armenians and the Hungarians –
who sought freedom from oppression in their homelands.

We are living in a period of ‘history in the making’
filled with turmoil, both manmade and natural.

Christianity has always been about picking up the pieces
and we are a ‘united and uniting’ church that literally
works so ‘that they may be one’.

One practical way for us to achieve that goal
is to be prepared for disaster response.

With all the dangerous weather events going on
throughout our country and the world this spring and
considering that Florida was hit by four hurricanes in 2004
and The Villages area itself was struck by a tornado in recent years,
we all need to have an emergency plan and to stay connected.

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The more we can anticipate communication and transportation needs in the event of a crisis such as a hurricane or tornado, the better our chances are to help one another whether that is in coordinating for evacuation when time permits, or re-gathering and resourcing when it doesn't, and coordinating to help evacuees who come to our area.

Our Called to Care "Shepherds" program is a simple way to maintain communication with one another.

Even if the phones go out, it means somebody knows to ask about you and to check up on you.

This interconnectedness of Christians looking out for each other has been a building block for the Church from the beginning.

If you don't know who your shepherd is and would like to be assigned to a shepherd group, or if you would like to become a shepherd yourself, please contact the church office this week.

In the event of a disaster in this area, this is where we would re-gather to reorganize – right here at the church.

Our church's first settled pastor, the Rev Bill Wealand, is also our conference's Disaster Response Coordinator.

So, we have plenty of help in revising and implementing such plans.

But we shouldn't need a disaster to get us to care for one another, for there are troubles and concerns that arise each day that can overwhelm us like a storm.

Being in a church that aspires to become a Beloved Community, individuals have a safe haven from the storms of life.

As the disciples looked up to the skies, observing Jesus' ascension, they were sent back down the hill as apostles – 'those who are sent'.

And they were no longer paired according to family or regional ties, but as members of the Beloved Community they had become.

They had become 'one' in their active concern for one another, unified by their common love for God through Christ.

So, let us cultivate that love for God and one another,

by the active concern of looking out for each other –

and not wait for a hurricane to push us in that direction.

Amen

Acts 1:6-14

6 So when they had come together, they asked him,
‘Lord, is this the time when you will
restore the kingdom to Israel?’

7[Jesus] replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods
that the Father has set by his own authority.

8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.’

9When he had said this, as they were watching,
he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

10While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven,
suddenly two men in white robes stood by them.

11They said,
‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?
This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven,
will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet,
which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away.

13When they had entered the city,
they went to the room upstairs where they were staying,
Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas,
Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus,
and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.

14All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer,
together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus,
as well as his brothers.

John 17:1-11

- [1] When Jesus had spoken these words,
he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said,
"Father, the hour has come;
glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee,
[2] since thou hast given him power over all flesh,
to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him.
[3] And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God,
and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.
[4] I glorified thee on earth,
having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do;
[5] and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence
with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made.
[6] "I have manifested thy name to the men
whom thou gavest me out of the world;
thine they were, and thou gavest them to me,
and they have kept thy word.
[7] Now they know that everything that thou hast given me is from thee;
[8] for I have given them the words which thou gavest me,
and they have received them and know in truth that I came from
thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me.
[9] I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world
but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine;
[10] all mine are thine, and thine are mine,
and I am glorified in them.
[11] And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world,
and I am coming to thee.
Holy Father, keep them in thy name,
which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.