

May 23, 2004

“THAT THE WORLD MAY KNOW”

John 17:20-26

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

I was once the pastor of a little church just outside a small town in Indiana. The congregation was one of three churches in the same denomination that served a town of less than 2,000 souls. All three churches were small and pastored by part-time student-pastors.

After I'd been there a while, I made a proposal to my church board. Why not merge the churches into one? Or, at least merge two of the three. It seemed to me to make sense. I argued that a merged church could afford a full-time pastor and maybe even a part time youth pastor.

The reactions to my proposal were swift. The first was personal. One man blurted out, “I wouldn't be caught dead in a pew with so-and-so and so-and-so.”

The second reaction was more practical. “Who would take care of the graveyard?”

The proposal died. They preferred to stay small and divided. No wonder the unchurched people of the community weren't impressed with our town's forms of Christianity.

Our Gospel Lesson suggests those unchurched neighbors were making an accurate assessment. Jesus prays that all his disciples might be one...SO THAT the world will know God sent Jesus. If we don't live in unity, they are free to conclude that God didn't send Jesus. At least, that's what Jesus implies.

Christian disunity is not a new problem. The first generation of Christians struggled with division and conflict. The Apostle Paul wrote a long letter to the church in Corinth trying to heal their divisions. It seems the church was divided into at least four factions – probably more.

Paul's point is simple: the church is one. Period. We are like a body made up of many parts, yet it's one body. There is an essential unity to the church. We are Christ's Body on earth.

Our congregation belongs to the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers rediscovered the Gospel of salvation by faith alone. We're not made right with God by our good works. The Reformation also recovered the authority of Scripture as the church's final authority. But the Reformation also lost the essential oneness of the church.

Colonial Church is a Protestant Church. We're also part of the Reformed Tradition of the Protestant branch of the church. In addition, we're belong to the Congregational expression of the Reformed Tradition and we're still trying to figure out which of the three Congregational denominations we fit best.

Some call such divisions in the church the scandal of modern Christianity. We now live in a new generation of Americans impatient with divisions, denominations and Christian traditions. Yet, there seems no end to our ability to divide and divide again. Ironically, perhaps, some reforming members of this impatient new generation are, in fact, creating even more divisions in Christ's one body, the church

Christians seem unable to live in one church or even one denomination. Closer to home, we're part of a small fellowship of Congregational Churches called the Minnesota Fellowship. Several years ago, several pastors in group decided to impose theological unity on the fellowship. They wanted to exclude one of the churches, Plymouth, in Minneapolis. The result was a severely weakened fellowship and conflict in the churches. Four of those pastors were fired within a year – in part because of the conflict in the fellowship.

Meanwhile, Jesus is still on his knees praying, "...that they may be one." And where the rubber meets the road for most of us, this local church, a quick look at our history indicates a long history of conflict. We have a deserved reputation as a contentious bunch of people. For generations, members have gotten mad and left. Apparently, some folks just don't want to share a pew with so-and-so.

So, how can we live in unity? How can we live with some people – and you know who they are!! Is it even possible?

It's worth noting that over 100 years ago the scandal of Protestant division got the attention of some church leaders. They began a movement toward unity called the Ecumenical Movement. Based on Jesus' call for unity in John 17, it was a massive effort to bring the church together. The result was the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, merged denominations and a plan to bring the major mainline denominations into some kind of organizational unity (C.O.C.U.).

The Ecumenical Movement is now a shadow of its former self. The energy is elsewhere. Not many Christian leaders worry about organizational unity these days. I suppose they are preoccupied with the issues tearing the denominations apart. It's possible that three major denominations will divide in the next year or two.

Even on the local scene, ecumenism is over. Local Ministerial Associations used to bring pastors and church together. Many communities, including Edina, no longer have active Ministerial Associations.

Why? Why is it so difficult to do what seems to make such sense? Why is it seemingly impossible to do what Jesus commanded as basic Christian behavior?

Perhaps another look at John 17 will help. It is, after all part of Jesus' last will and testament, his final instructions to his disciples. What Jesus prayed that night is quite clear,

I ask...on behalf of those who will believe in me...that they may all be one.

Then Jesus adds a phrase that complicates things,

As, you Father are in me and I am in you.

But Jesus isn't finished with us yet. He goes on,

...so that [conclusion, purpose] the world may believe that you have sent me.

According to Jesus, unity is nonnegotiable. It's a command. It's essential. It's a matter of Christian integrity. What we are and how we behave reveals something essential about us. It demonstrates the integrity of what we say we believe.

The church exists, says Jesus, to demonstrate to the world that God sent Jesus. We, the members of Colonial Church, are here to show the watching world that God loves the world. We are not responsible for denominations, the Ecumenical Movement or the behavior of other churches. We are responsible for our common life and what it reveals about us and what it demonstrates about God.

That's an awesome – and impossible – responsibility. But there is good news in our text, good news often missed when we read it.

When we read we are to be one AS God and Jesus are one, we instantly start to think about the Trinity, how God and Jesus are one being, essence and so forth. Trinitarian thinking is about as abstract and thinking gets. And it's extremely difficult to figure out how that works in real life. Some kind of organizational union is the usual conclusion.

But the text isn't about the essential being of God and Jesus. It's not commentary on the mystery of the Trinity. What it describes is something you might call “functional.”

The burden of Jesus prayer how God “sent” him on his mission about to be completed. Three times in this short paragraph the verb “sent” is used. Thirty eight times in John's gospel Jesus is “sent” by God to save the world.

In other words, the oneness of God and Jesus is their oneness of mission. They agreed fully, 100%, without dissention, harmoniously, that the world is worth saving and that God would send Jesus to do the work of salvation.

As the most famous verse in the Bible puts it, “God so loved the world, he SENT his only begotten son to save the world.” God loved enough to sacrifice his son. The Son so loves the world he died on its behalf.

Jesus is God's redeeming, reconciling, saving love in the world. Jesus embodied the love and grace and mercy of God. He is God's presence in the world. It's Jesus and God's single mission.

We are the Body of Christ. We are sent on the same mission. We embody Jesus' love for the world. To borrow a new word, the church is God's love *embedded* in the world.

In other words, the mission of God in Jesus Christ unifies the church. Everything else tends to divide the church.

The World Council of Churches began as a mission movement. It was a powerful attempt to lay aside centuries of rivalry for the sake of the salvation of the world. Quickly, the movement turned toward theological unity and spent years attempting to "agree" on Christian basics. At the same time the movement tried to become an institutional "super church." Finally, it degenerated into ideology. The church is as divided as ever.

What will unify this congregation is not the usual suspects: our architecture, matters of governance, the personalities of the clergy. No, the unifying factor is our mission. We call it Jesus Dream for the World.

We exist to bear the saving love of God to the world. We are God's ministers. That means we are here to touch others with the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Ministry is as simple as that: touching others with God's love.

The text isn't through with us. It's clear: unity is found our common mission. But the motive for our mission must be God's motive mission.

Often the church tries to motivate people for mission or ministry with a call to obedience. We're told if we work harder, give more, sacrifice, deny ourselves, etc. we will accomplish our mission.

Perhaps. But the bible's motive for mission is simpler and profoundly deeper. Listen to the text again,

Verse 23 – ...so that the world will know that you have sent me and have *loved* them even as you have *loved* me.

Verse 24 - ...because you *loved* me before the foundation of the world.

Verse 26 - ...so that the *love* with which you have *loved* me may be in them....

Now, hear verse 22,

The *glory* that you have given me I have given them so that they may be one.

In John the glory of Jesus is his cross where God's love is demonstrated and defined. Jesus calls his disciples to carry that cross of love into God's world, into God's dearly loved world.

We exist for mission and our motive is God's love for the world.

The real question today and every day is rather simple. Do we love the world? Not just any love will do. Do we love the world with God's love.