

Make Us One

Sterling UMC
October 3, 2010
John 17:20-26, Ephesians 4:1-6

We had finished the game two hours earlier and were sitting at a large round table in Pizza Hut.

Loud conversation filled the room. The subject was basketball. At our table, we replayed our victory in detail, playfully chiding those who had made mistakes, congratulating the night's heroes. Other nights the talk might have been of defeat, and we would have agonized over those same mistakes and wondered, "Just what is wrong with our ball club."

In either case the talk was sincere and easily understood by all. We were teammates, and teammates behave that way.

I have often wondered about the camaraderie on the basketball teams I have played on over the years. Why is conversation so easy? Why are friendships so quickly made? How can the atmosphere be so accepting that even the poor guy who missed the potential game-winning foul shot is quickly accepted by all once we get to the restaurant?

It certainly isn't because we are so much alike. I look around the table and see a construction worker, a well-to-do business man, a school teacher, and a retired navy officer.

Nor is it because we have discovered some magic formula for conversation. We have varying abilities to articulate concepts and feelings. We say the wrong things, stumble for words, interrupt one another, and miss obvious signals of distress and need.

No. I've decided the reason things worked for us was because we shared a common passion; basketball. We revel in it and love to talk about it. We could recall details of games years earlier with uncanny accuracy; we could analyze our current team's strengths and weaknesses for hours on end; we could talk with evangelistic fervor about strategy and our future prospects. No conversation ever strayed from basketball for any significant length of time.

The best times I've had with church people have many elements in common with the basketball fellowship I have just described.

They have occurred not because we are all alike; the church is made up of people from all classes, varied occupations, and all age levels. Nor have they occurred because we have discovered new formulas for resolving conflict, or encouraging one another, or discussing the issues of the day.

The best times have come when we all focused our thoughts and conversations on one thing, our passion for Jesus Christ. When there was a true sense of unity among the body of believers. As David puts it, "How good and pleasant it is when we live together in unity." Yet this seems to be the exception rather than the rule. We don't see this very often.

Why is it so hard for Christ's Church to live together in harmony? Why is unity such an elusive commodity?

Jesus must have known how difficult we would find this. He anticipated our

inability to live and work together. That's why in one of the most important of his prayers recorded in Scripture, Jesus prays for all who would follow him, including you and me.

The burden of Jesus' prayer is unity. "Father, make them one." You can almost feel the burden on his heart, hear the emotion in his voice, and see the tears in his eyes as he prays.

The disciples had often exhibited a spirit of selfishness, competition, and disunity. Can you imagine how this must have broken the Savior's heart? I wonder how he feels today when he sees the condition of the church? How it must pain him to see a member of the body injured, or cut-off, or leave because of the actions or inactions of another.

Jesus is praying for us. And his concern is for unity. "Father, make them one, just as you are in me and I in you." He wants us to experience the same kind of unity with each other that he experiences with the Father. Christians can know unity among themselves only if they are living in union with God. Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches." Our unity comes from our common attachment to the Vine. Each branch living in union with the vine is united with all the others doing the same. That's our common bond. That's the source from where we draw our life and strength. And that's what unites us.

So Christian harmony is not based on the externals of the flesh, but the internals and eternal of the Spirit. In other words what's in our hearts. We must look beyond the elements of our first birth: race, nationality, color, abilities, personalities, social status and build our fellowship on the essentials of our new birth. In the words of John Wesley, "In essentials unity. In non-essentials liberty. In all things charity."

But unity does not just happen; we have to work at it. Often differences between people can lead to division, but this should not be true in the church. Instead of concentrating on what divides us, we should remember what unites us.

The Apostle Paul picks up on this theme and expands it in his letter to the Ephesians. In the passage read earlier, Paul gives the seven cornerstones of our unity as the Body of Christ. He says, "There is one Body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all..." Notice what word is repeated over and over again. One.

The church is composed of many types of people from a variety of backgrounds with a multitude of gifts and abilities. It is easy for these differences to divide people. But despite the differences, we find common ground, these cornerstones of Christian unity. We don't lose our individual identities, but we have an overriding oneness in Christ.

We have never achieved perfect unity in a local church anymore than any of us has been completely transformed into the image of Christ. It is a process that is ongoing, one that will not be realized ultimately and perfectly until Jesus comes back and is completely in charge. But that is the goal. To be willing to accept less is sin. And of that sin we are all guilty and should be on our knees in praying for forgiveness!

Why was Jesus so concerned about unity? Why is it so important? It makes the church a positive example to the world and helps draw others to Christ.

We are a people of mission. And true unity melts us. It thaws us out so that we can move and become a powerful witness to the reality of God's love. It is this witness our Lord wants in this world. That's why he wants us to be united so that as he prayed to his Father, "The world might believe that you have sent me." The lost world cannot

see God, but they can see Christians; and what they see in us they will believe about God. If they see love and unity, they will believe God is love. If they see hatred and division, they will reject the message of the Gospel. What do they see when they look at us?

Unity also renews and revitalizes our ministry because there is less tension and friction to sap our energy and strength. It is the oil that keeps us going.

There is a story of a wealthy south Indian landowner who had some very quarrelsome sons, always jealous of one another and always in conflict among themselves. On his deathbed, the father called his sons in and divided his property between them. Then he called for some sticks to be brought, nicely tied into a bundle, and asked them one by one, beginning with the eldest to break the bundle. But so long as the sticks were closely bound together, no matter how hard they tried, none of them could break the bundle. "Now," the father said to the eldest, "untie the bundle, and try to break the sticks." This was not too difficult, and soon each of the sticks, broken one by one, lay before them in pieces. The father taught them that - united they stood, divided they fell.

This is what Jesus is trying to teach us. Together we are strong and can do mighty things, but if we are divided we can be broken and we will fail. We must stand side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder, pulling together instead of pulling apart.

So how do we make unity a reality?

First we must remember that unity is not the same as uniformity. Unity comes from within; it is a spiritual grace, while uniformity is the result of pressure from the outside.

We might assume that if we really love the Lord and each other we will always agree. But think about it, do we always agree with our parents? Our spouse? Our best friend? Ourselves?

Living in unity does not mean we will agree on everything; there will be many opinions just as there are many notes in a musical chord. But we agree on our purpose in life - to work together for God. Jesus is not asking for us to become carbon copies or spiritual clones of each other.

In mission we become a symphony, varied instruments joining in one theme. We are all different, with different gifts, talents, and styles. But in our unity, based on love, we are the Body of Christ - literally the hope for all creation. And when unity happens, "Watch Out!" for there is nothing in this world that can stand in our way.

Secondly, we begin removing the impediments to unity. What is the biggest impediment to unity? Autonomy. The opposite of unity is not disunity as much as autonomy. By that I mean people refusing to submit to the teaching of the Scriptures. This is the attitude that says, "I am more important than anyone else. Or my contribution and opinion is more significant than yours." Disunity rarely comes from legitimate theological disagreements. It comes when people act autonomously, and do not exemplify the mind of Christ.

As we teach people to develop the mind of Christ, we build unity. But it is impossible to muscle unity in a church. You can't simply wave a magic wand and expect it to happen. Unity doesn't begin with strategies it begins with people. It begins when we as Paul begs us, "Live a life worthy of the calling you received. Be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing one another in love. Making every effort to keep the unity

of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

How are you helping to unify the Body of Christ, the church? You can start by praying for other Christians, building others up, lifting up Christ, working together in humility, and refusing to get sidetracked, arguing over divisive matters.

Then ask yourself these questions:

1. What dominates my conversations? Is it the latest juicy tidbit about so-and-so? Is it complaints about what somebody in the church is doing or not doing? Or is it Jesus Christ and what he means in my life?
2. Is there something I'm holding on to that is hindering unity? Why not let it go?
3. Is there a brother or a sister here this morning that there is something between us keeping us from being united? Why not go to that person and make things right?

If Jesus thought it important enough to pray for unity, don't you think we should also pray? It starts with each of us individually. Don't be part of the problem. Be a part of the solution! We can't pray, "Father, change him or her." Our prayer should be, "Father, make us one and let it begin with me."

If we will only let him, Christ will weave us, different threads, different colors, different textures, into a beautiful tapestry that will bring glory to him and be a living testimony to all the world of the amazing love of Jesus Christ.

"Behold how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity."
Father, Make us one!