

## Being One in a Divided World

*John 17:1-9; 20-23*

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Today is a very special Sunday for many Christians throughout the earth. It is called World Communion Sunday and it is a celebration that began in 1936 in the Presbyterian Church here in America, in the Shadyside Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh to be precise when Hugh Thompson Kern was the pastor. Today millions of Christians in great cathedrals and grass huts, in multitudes of churches and denominations, will seek to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a sign of and a prayer for our unity in Christ.

Being one in a divided world is a daunting task and seems more challenging and problematic with each passing year. But is it God's will? If so, regardless of how impossible Christian unity may seem, it is an essential and God-given part of our calling as disciples. This morning I would like to address the subject of Christian unity by reference to both the Biblical text and a foreign context that brought home to me the importance of this mission.

The text is from the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 where in the final hours of his life he prays that his disciples "may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23) And the context is a foreign one, Israel, January, 1996, where I studied with a group of ministers for three weeks at the Tantur Ecumenical Center in Jerusalem. So, the text is from John and the context from Jerusalem has shaped my own faith and commitment to the cause of Christian unity, which World Communion Sunday emphasizes.

Sometimes it is only as we step outside of our own comfort zone, or outside of our own cultural context that we can look back on it and critique it with greater insight and objectivity, realizing how outsiders must look at us. You and I live in a culture and in a nation where Christianity constitutes the dominant and prevailing faith. We American Christians tend to align ourselves along denominational lines and more often than not identify ourselves, not as Christians, but as Protestants, Catholics, as Orthodox, or even more specifically as Lutherans, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Presbyterians, or whatever. And of course each of these subgroups have subgroups of their own, so that a person may not be just a Baptist, but a Free Will Baptist; or not just a Presbyterian, but a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church; and not just the Church of God, but the Church of God – Anderson. And thus, it is *easy* for us to fall into the trap of thinking that we are competing with other Christians and that the matters which distinguish us are far more important than those upon which we agree.

What is more, we spend a great deal of energy, resources and imagination in trying to demonstrate to other Christians, as well as to the world, how our particular expression of the faith is better, more faithful, more scriptural, and more to be preferred than the others. Now it

would seem that the sickness and insanity (not to mention the sinfulness) of this mean-spirited criticism and competitiveness would be self-evident. It would seem that with the Lord's words in our ears and Jesus' example before our eyes that we would recognize the futility of judging others in an effort to elevate ourselves. And yet, as is the case with many things, we often cannot see the forest for the trees. We are perhaps too caught up in this competitive religious climate to see its insanity and its sickness.

And so, it was only in leaving western culture and the states some twenty-five years ago and returning to a land that we call holy that I saw, and more importantly, felt how sad and sick this Christian infighting is, how contrary to the will of Christ it is, and how necessary and important Christian unity remains. Within modern day Israel Christians are a distinct minority less than 2% of the population declining every year because of refugees leaving amid the hostilities and abuses. But in visiting with Palestinians and Jews over our three weeks in that land, I noticed no one asked me if I was Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. No one inquired if my church was Latin, Armenian, or Greek. The only issue seemed to be whether or not I was a Christian. I was asked do you follow Jesus Christ. Are you a disciple of his? That seemed to be all that mattered, and, in truth, that is all that ultimately should matter.

But that was among the common people mind you. Among the leaders of the various churches in Jerusalem there remains much hostility and conflict. One day in Jerusalem not long after my trip there, hostilities broke out on the roof of one of the most revered sites in Christianity, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Chairs were hurled, iron bars were slung, and fists flew and when the dust cleared seven Ethiopian Orthodox monks and four Egyptian (Coptic) monks had been injured. The fight started when an Egyptian monk decided to move his chair into the shade – technically, argued the Ethiopians, encroaching upon their jurisdiction. Because of an edict issued in 1752 by a Turkish sultan and reaffirmed in 1852, this edict defines which parts of this holy church standing above the traditional site of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus belongs to each of six Christian groups: the Latins (Roman Catholics), Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Copts and Ethiopians. You may wonder, as do I, how such things can happen if we accept our oneness in Jesus Christ.

The issue of Christian unity may not seem very significant to some of us here this morning, but it was a matter of ultimate importance to Jesus. There in the Garden of Gethsemane on the evening of his betrayal and arrest, when he was pouring out his heart in prayer to his father what did Jesus pray? He prayed for his disciples then and now. He prayed for all of us who would come to believe through the words of the Apostles. And what did he pray – “that they may be one” as he and the father are one. So as Jesus was approaching betrayal, suffering and death, nothing mattered to him more than the unity, the oneness of his disciples. Why? It wasn't just unity for unity's sake. No, he prayed “that they may all be one **so that** the world may believe that you have sent me.” It is for the sake of the world; it is for the witness of gospel; it is for the evangelization of all humanity as well as the integrity of the gospel that disciples of Jesus Christ are to be one. Why would or why should a non-believing world ever be drawn to a savior whose disciples spend so much of their time and energy attacking and belittling one another, and, even in the name of that Savior?

Jesus prayed for his disciples “that they may all be one.” In my own mind this does not assume any kind of structural or ecclesiastical unity, though I am certainly not opposed to that. Unity does not require uniformity, but it does require humility instead of arrogance, respect instead of rancor, cooperation instead of competition, and an open rather than a closed heart and mind. Our differences, our unique styles of witness and worship, our particular gifts and skills can all be used in the shared work of the larger Christian community and can enable us to minister more affectively in areas that may require differing styles and commitments.

Our Lord never expected his disciples to look alike, to think alike, or to act alike. Just think of those first disciples. There was Philip, the cautious intellectual man with unresolved questions. There was Thomas who made no secret of his doubts. There was Peter the impulsive fisherman who would speak and act long before his mind ever went into gear. There was Simon the Zealot, a political revolutionary bent on the overthrow of the occupying Roman forces; and Matthew on the opposite extreme, a tax collector, an employee of the Roman Internal Revenue Service. How boring, how dull and how ineffective the early church would have been and would be now if the disciples were cut from the same piece of cloth. But while Jesus did not expect them to be alike in every aspect or to agree with each on every point, he did expect them not to lord it over one another, not to vie for favor or first place, but to strive only to be a servant to one another. And the greatest among them would be the least of all. He did expect them so to believe and so to behave that the world would be drawn to their savior and come to know that God loved the world even as he loved the son. And is any less expected of disciples today?

In going some distance away in 1996 I gained a clearer vision and felt in a more profound sense the continuing need for unity among the disciples of Jesus Christ at home and abroad. In the center where we studied together, Christians from various denominations and from different corners of the world lived, worked and worshiped together. We could recognize and celebrate our particular traditions because we affirmed our oneness in Jesus Christ. We were brothers and sisters together with different stories and with unique commitments but a common Lord.

Now I indicated earlier that the value and necessity of Christian unity was something I came to feel as well as mentally embrace or theologically grasp. And the feeling for me came in a worship service on Sunday, January 21, 1996 in an obscure little village outside of Jerusalem that you may never have heard of. The name is *Abu Gosh* known also by its biblical name of *Kiriath-Jearim*, located ten miles north of Jerusalem. Father Tom Stransky, the Paulist priest in charge of our group, suggested that we go to *Abu Gosh* for worship on Sunday morning and I must confess that having never heard of the place, and knowing little about it except that according to *1 Samuel 6* this was where a man named Abinadab lived and it was here in his private home that he kept the Ark of the Covenant for some twenty years before David brought it to Jerusalem. I was not really that excited about this excursion, for in our weeks together I had seen enough old churches and traversed numerous ancient biblical sights. Yet sometimes the holiest encounters with God comes in those places and in those moments that we do not plan and could not have anticipated.

The church we attended that Sunday morning was called the Church of the Resurrection (Eglise De La Resurrection) because this site is also one of the presumed locations for Emmaus, where Jesus broke bread with his distraught disciples three days after his death and they recognized him as the risen Lord. The church itself is an ancient Crusader church that dates from 1140 A.D. Unlike many of the ancient Roman and Orthodox churches in that country which are ornate and gilded with gold and statuary, this church was incredibly simple and starkly beautiful. The service was led by French Benedictine monks and nuns from the monastery and convent nearby. A young African priest, newly ordained, delivered his very first sermon in French. The acoustics, the singing was absolutely incredible and unforgettable. One of the nuns played a lone recorder and the hauntingly beautiful sounds reverberated among the lofty stone arches of the church. The walls were covered in places with ancient frescos revealing the ravages of time and the evidence of religious conflict. The Muslims who have ruled this land for centuries had not destroyed the church but had removed or damaged the faces of all the figures in the frescos in accordance with their convictions about idolatry and images. A stairway beneath the church led to an ancient well that supplied plentiful water for this congregation and where children were baptized. Shortly before we arrived two children had been baptized in a service while scud missiles from Saddam Hussein flew overhead. For the basement served as a bomb shelter as well. The well in the basement of the church in Abu Gosh has supplied plentiful water for God's people from day one. Samuel and David, no doubt had drunk from this well. In *Judges 18:12* that six hundred armed warriors from the tribe of Dan camped at his site in order to drink the water from this well. Crusaders were baptized here as were two infants in a candlelight service as scud missiles flew overhead from Saddam Hussein. Because the walls to the church are twelve feet thick its basement served as a local bomb shelter.

Now there may have been twenty-five priests and nuns conducting the mass and providing the music but no more than fifty of us where there as worshipers. Most of those in attendance were part of our contingent from Tantur. We followed the service in English as the leaders spoke and sang in French and Latin. One of the scriptures read that day was our call to worship this morning. "I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

I must tell you that I was personally overwhelmed that day by the wonder and mystery of our oneness in Christ which we are so guilty of either denying or dismissing as irrelevant. For the first time in my life in a Roman Catholic Church I was invited to come forward and receive the sacrament. We were not only given the bread, but we drank out of a common cup, something I had never witnessed in a Catholic Church in this country.

Words can not adequately describe my feelings in that service but more that anything else I felt what I would call a sense of connectedness. I felt connected to the ancient peoples who had been at this place and drunk from these waters – Jews, Christians, and even Muslims who are all part of the human family and all descendants of Abraham. I felt connected to the prophet Samuel and King David and a mysterious man named Abinadaba who may have used the Ark of the Covenant as a coffee table in his living room. I felt connected to Cleopas and the

other disciple who had broken bread and recognized the risen Lord on that first Easter evening. I felt connected to the crusaders and the pilgrims who had visited this site and constructed this church in which I sat. I felt connected to the young African priest nervously delivering his first sermon to people who did not speak his native tongue. I felt connected to the girl across the aisle from me who had ridden out on the bus with us from Jerusalem. She was a Jewish girl exploring the claims of Christianity as she continued on her religious pilgrimage. I felt connected to the French people about us and realized that some of my felt prejudices against the French have been based on a few isolated and unpleasant encounters with some of their countrymen who have little regard for Americans. And I felt ashamed of my prejudice. I felt connected to the Roman Catholics who for centuries considered Protestants heretics but after Vatican II started referring to us more favorably as “separated brethren.”

And I also felt connected to my own grandfather whom I never met and whose devout Irish Catholic family disowned him when he married a Baptist girl from Kentucky. I wondered what my own ancestors would think of me receiving this sacrament as a Protestant minister in a Catholic Church. I felt connected to the parents who had baptized their children as scud missiles flew overhead. In short, I felt at one with the family with God and the disciples of Christ. I felt connected to all of those Christians past and present, from different countries and cultures and churches who look to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and who genuinely desire to be a faithful people.

Never has a communion service had such profound impact upon me and as I left the Church of the Resurrection in Abu Gosh. I left not only better understanding and seeing but feeling more deeply the passion behind our Lord’s prayer “that they may all be one.” It is my prayer that some of us on this World Communion Sunday will sense that same connectedness with brothers and sisters about this table throughout the world today.

And so, I invite you to come to this table knowing that Christ not only redeems and forgives you but seeks to use you as his disciple. I invite you to come knowing that you have brothers and sisters around the world and through out the ages that share in both the benefits and the blessings of this sacrament. I invite you to come knowing that the host of this meal, the Lord Jesus Christ, desires that we discern his body as we commune. That is to say, we are to recognize our brothers and sisters in Christ as we gather here. I invite you to come and to pray to work that all of our Lord’s disciples may be one so that the world may believe and experience God’s love for themselves and others.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.