

ONE AND FREE

Easter 7: New boldness

John 17:20-26; Acts 16:16-34

Jesus cared a lot about the unity of his disciples.

That would be putting it mildly.

He was impassioned . . . and insistent,

as he expressed his deep longing for his disciples,
in his famous prayer in today's Gospel, John 17.

“Oh, Father, that they may be one!”

And again, “That they may *all* be one.”

“That *they* may be one, as *we* are one,

I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one!”

In the seven short verses of today's reading,

six times Jesus uses the word “one”

in *pleading* with his Father for the unity of his followers.

This is pretty important to Jesus.

After he left the earth

he longed for his disciples to remain as one body,
united in him, as he was united in God.

So . . . how did they *do*?

The million-dollar question.

The World Christian Encyclopedia

counts 34,000 Christian denominations.

There are dozens of separate Mennonite denominations

in North America alone.

We might be one of the most splintered traditions,

except maybe the Baptists.

So how do you think Jesus *feels* about all these denominations?

Do you suppose he's weeping

over the failure of his disciples to remain one?

It's a popular truism.

Preachers *often* point to the thousands of denominations,
then point to Jesus' prayer,

and then say, isn't it shameful?

But I wonder, is it *really*?

I Jesus *really* weeping over these denominations, or not?

Well, there are certainly many parts of the Christian story of schism,
that are absolutely shameful, and worth weeping over.

We could probably point to a number of Mennonite splits
and say surely there could have been a better way
to resolve our differences,
than to walk away from each other.

But on the other hand,

is the fact there is a plethora of denominations,
in and of itself a sign of the church's failure?

Should it be the goal of the church to do away with denominations?

I would argue . . . *strongly* . . . NO!

If there was a way to measure

how much God was interested in something, on a scale of 1-10 . . .
the structural unity of the church

(that is, getting all Christians to break down denominational walls
and come together under one global Christian body)

I don't think even registers a .001

on the “God-is-interested” scale.

Hear me out.

I'm all for unity.

Jesus was impassioned in his plea for one-ness.

So must I be.

But more often than not,

being ONE in structure

only gives the impression of being one in Christ.

It's a cheap substitute.

Structural unity doesn't measure anything very substantial at *all*.

It certainly doesn't measure spiritual one-ness.

Whenever we gather under ONE structural umbrella,
it gives the impression that there is blessed unity.

As a matter of fact, there is often (should I say *usually*)
more conflict over differences *inside*
each of these supposedly unified bodies,
than there is *between* the different bodies.

In other words,
Mennonites have more to fight about with each other
(and they *do*),
than Mennonites have to fight about with Lutherans.
Episcopalians have more to fight about with each other
(and they *do*),
than Episcopalians have to fight about with Methodists.
The same is true with almost *any* group.

Now I truly love the Anabaptist angle on the Gospel.
I love and value being Mennonite.
But let it be perfectly clear.
Getting all Christians to become Mennonites
was *NOT* what Jesus was praying for!

Being united in one organized religious body
says very little *indeed*,
about whether or not we are living as One in Jesus Christ.

So what *does* bring about our one-ness in Christ?
If it's not structure and organization . . . it must be theology.
It must be that even though we're divided up
into all kinds of groups and religious bodies,
what's *really* important is that we become ONE in our theology,
on the same page in our beliefs and practices.
Right?

Well, let's *think* about that.
Yes, we *are* called to do good sound theological discernment.
Our aim, *always*, ought to be to seek together to find deeper truth—
a deeper *shared* truth about God.

But is it really God's intention that all Christians
all around the world,

think the same way about God?
Should all Christians *really*
operate with the same metaphors for God?
have the same vision of how God works in the world?
use the same doctrinal language
to describe their experience of God?

Do we think that God does not have
different working agendas and different modes of operation,
depending on whether God is working
in a Swiss-German community in Ohio,
or in the lives of New England aristocrats,
or among Miami's Haitian immigrants,
or in the entertainment industry in southern California,
or with the urban poor on Chicago's south side?
Not to mention, whether God is working
in Sudan, or Hong Kong, or Afghanistan, or London, England.

For that matter, bring it close to home.
Do we think God wants all of Jesus' followers in Harrisonburg
to believe and to do the same thing,
whether they are situated among the marginalized
in the northeast community,
or in Old Town Harrisonburg,
or in an upscale east-side subdivision,
or a trailer park populated with Spanish-speaking immigrants,
or adjacent to JMU student housing on Port Road,
or in a concentrated Mennonite community like Park View?
No! Our practices, our metaphors, our theological priorities,
cannot be exactly the same wherever we go.
The way we articulate and practice our faith
will adjust based on our context.
Faith and practice is contextual.

So the answer is *no*,
I don't think that perfect uniformity of theology and practice
was what Jesus was so impassioned about in his prayer.

So if it's not one-ness of structure and organization,

if it's not one-ness of belief and practice,
what is it that can make us one, as Jesus prayed . . . and longed for?

The kind of being ONE

Jesus was yearning for was of a different nature.
We see that by the words he prayed so eloquently,
“As you and I are one, Father, may they be one.”
“As I am in you and you in me, may they be in us.”

In his prayer, Jesus was drawing a direct comparison
between the oneness he experienced with his father in heaven,
and the oneness that we are *also* called to experience with God.

Between Jesus and his father,
there was a deep unity,
a deep oneness of purpose,
a deep continuity of mission.

In various places Jesus deferred to the one who sent him,
saying things like,

I only do what my Father does.

I am only speaking my Father's words.

There was not a disconnect, but a continuity,
between the mission and purposes and will of God in the world
and what Jesus undertook to do and to say.

And Jesus' prayer was that this *same* unity and continuity,
would be the experience of his disciples.

Because as they align themselves
with the mission of God in the world,
and the words and ways of Jesus in the world,
they will, by definition, be in unity with each other.

If A=C, and B=C, then A must equal B.

If we find ourselves in unity with the purposes of God in Christ,
we *will be* in unity with each other . . .
even when we speak different languages,
even when we use different metaphors to describe our faith,
even when we live in vastly different cultural contexts.

We want to be one?

We must learn to know Jesus more deeply.

We must immerse ourselves in the full story of Jesus in scripture.
We must open ourselves more completely to the Spirit of Jesus,
the Advocate we talked about last Sunday.

Jesus wants followers who are in synch with
his mission
his identity
his purpose
and who will continue the work he began,
continue . . . as in an unbroken line,
without interruption or corruption.

And now to bring this around to the topic of freedom.

It is this oneness of purpose
and continuity with the person and mission of Jesus,
that gives people the ability
to live lives of true, deep freedom,
even in the *midst* of terrible trials.

When we are one, we are free.

What do I *mean* by that?

I mean that as we become clear about who we are in Christ,
as we fully immerse ourselves in Christ,
as we become *in* Christ, as Christ is *in* God,
like Jesus prayed,
we will also reach a place of deep inner freedom.

It's those who don't know who they are,
who are in bondage.

It's those who squander their lives chasing after the wind,
who *pretend* to be free, by answering to no one,
who seek to satisfy every fleeting desire,
it is *they* who miss out on true freedom and deep joy.

Despite the illusion of freedom,
they are bound to their own insecurity,
always grasping, searching, but never finding.

See, our culture has this silly idea that freedom is escape.
That freedom is getting out from under
any external constriction or limitation or pain
or inconvenience or even, annoyance.
We should be free to do and to be
whatever we good and well *feel* like doing or being.

The biblical concept of freedom is so much richer than that.
Freedom is not just escape from restriction.
Freedom is learning how to embrace our full humanity,
discovering how to live into the fullness of life
that God designed for us.
Freedom is the deep liberation that comes
from discovering and choosing
the life God created us for.
Freedom is aligning ourselves with God's larger purposes.
In other words, freedom is obedience.
What a *concept*!

Now we can see that story of Paul and Silas in Acts 16,
from a whole different angle.
Did you wonder how Paul and Silas had the wherewithal
to sing songs of praise and thanksgiving,
after they were beaten to a pulp, bloodied and bruised,
and locked in chains and stocks?

You see, Paul and Silas were never truly in captivity.
Those chains and stocks only held their arms and legs.
Hardware could not imprison Paul and Silas' deepest humanity.
Even a dark damp prison could not obscure
the light and image of God that gave them deep liberation.

There were other prisoners in that story . . .
that *weren't* in jail.
Some of them were set free. Some *weren't*.
The demon-possessed slave girl was freed twice, in one act of God.
Freed from a spirit that held her captive,
and freed from human ownership and exploitation.

But her owners *were* in jail, so to speak. And stayed there.
Captive to greed.
Captive to a death-dealing desire
to manipulate others to their advantage.

Do we want to be truly free?
The path laid out for us in today's scripture readings
is to choose the right master.
Let us, by faith, submit ourselves to the purposes of God in Christ.
As we unite ourselves with God in Christ,
we will find ourselves in deeper union with each other,
and we will find our deepest freedom.

There is a wonderful ancient hymn of the church,
"Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est."
Where there is charity and love, God is there.
We find it in *Sing the Journey*, #39.
It says there the text dates to the 9th century, which is plenty old.
But some scholars believe it goes back much further than that.
So what I've said this morning is nothing new, at *all*.
Because this text sums up exactly what I've been saying.

Since the love of Christ has brought us all together
Let us all rejoice and be glad, now and always.
Let every one love the Lord God, the living God;
and with sincere hearts let us love each other now.

Therefore when we gather as one in Christ Jesus,
let our love enfold each race, creed, every person.
let envy, division and strife cease among us;
may Christ our Lord dwell among us in every heart.

Bring us with your saints to behold your great beauty,
there to see you, Christ our God, throned in great glory;
there to possess heaven's peace and joy, your truth and love,
for endless ages of ages, world without end.

—Phil Kniss, May 16, 2010