

“Unity in Love”

May 8, 2016

“Who Cares about Unity?” series – 7th Sunday of Easter

SHOW VIDEO - THE POWER OF UNITY IS STRENGTH

One of our leaders shared a story of when his dad was saying a mealtime prayer. He spoke so softly that no one else could hear. One of his kids asked what he said and the man replied, “I wasn’t praying to you.” We know that Jesus went off by himself to pray often, and it’s in this moment - right before he is arrested and tried and killed - that we hear his prayer.

This is the end of a longer prayer of Jesus – some call it the real Lord’s Prayer because Jesus prays as he prepares to leave his disciples. He has shared a special meal with them and told them what will happen – how he will give his life for them. He washed their feet as a sign of love and service and has told them to do the same.

He already said to them “By this others will know that you’re my disciples if you love one another.” Then, he turns to God in prayer. It’s not a series of instructions for his followers, but genuine prayer asking God to help the community of believers.

It’s intimate. Jesus shows how close he and the Father are. It’s challenging as he says that going to the cross will show his glory. Our expectations for glory are much different - fame and fortune much more than sacrifice. And truthfully, Jesus’ prayer is a little confusing as he prays about the connection between himself and God the Father. But at the end, he prays that the unity of those who believe in him would be a powerful witness to the world - and he’s clear to say that love is the goal.

First, Jesus prays for himself. Then, he prays for his disciples. And then, in these verses that we read, he prays for all who believe and all who will come to believe in every age. It’s after he prays that Jesus and his disciples go to the garden where Judas betrays him into the hands of Roman soldiers.

Jesus prays that the community of faith will bear fruit – that something will come of their witness. Jesus prays “that they may be one as we are one.” We might hear it as a call to Christian unity - of being ecumenical and working with other denominations in our programs.

Maybe you think of Unity Christian Music Festival and the witness of thousands of people coming together to worship. That’s important and powerful, but when Jesus prayed these words, that wasn’t his main goal.

Jesus prays that all who believe in him will be one with God just as he is one with God. He prays for us to be as close to God as he is so that our witness can attract others

to God. He prays that people will see God in us and in the way that we talk and act – in how we treat others.

Unity isn't something we can produce or manufacture on our own. Unity comes from God. It starts with God the Father and Jesus the Son and the relationship they have together. They are connected. They are dependent on each other. Jesus is the revelation of God to the world.

From the beginning, community is important. Relationship is important. We understand God better through the nurturing relationships that we have - whether a biological parent or someone who's been like a parent to us. God blesses us through those relationships. We get a sense of God's love for us through them. They matter to us.

Remember that Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet and given them the commandment – "love one another as I have loved you." Jesus wants those who believe in him to be united in love. Obviously, he knew that his own disciple friends had arguments. They talked about who was the greatest. They wanted to know who had it right. They still needed help.

But Jesus is secure in God's love even as he faces the cross. God's love doesn't save Jesus from pain and difficulty; God's love helps him to overcome it. Jesus prays that we would experience God's love that way. As we think about the love of mothers and all those who nurture us in faith, I know that we have different experiences, but Jesus' prayer can help us to understand the way we are to live and love.

Maybe you had parents or caregivers who wanted to protect you - to shelter you from everything bad that could happen. I feel like that sometimes. I don't want Ana and Luka to see, hear, or experience anything that will harm them. I have a choice to keep them inside so they'll never be near traffic. I take away their bikes or anything else where they might fall and get hurt. I can cut them off from other kids and people who I think aren't a good influence. I can keep them away from every social media site ever created, which is incredibly difficult. I love them, but sheltering them too much won't allow them to learn and grow.

My other choice is to tell them about the dangers and make sure do all I can to help them navigate the tough times. The reality is that God doesn't protect us from the pain of the world. It's a part of the human condition. We're not promised life free of struggle, free of pain, or even free of death.

What we are promised is the gift of eternal life, of God's steadfast and faithful love, of God's help to overcome the deepest and most difficult times of life. What we are promised - what Jesus prays for - is that his disciples and all those who seek to

believe would know the gift of God's love. Jesus wants us to know that agape love - love that sacrifices for others - is the goal.

Now, if all who believe in him were to be one with God, then being one with each other would come naturally. The unity that Jesus and God have is a unity based on a common mission and message. Jesus came to reveal the fullness of God to us. If we believe in him, then we're sent to reveal him to the world. Our unity as Christians comes from God, and our unity has the power to witness to the world. But so many times we forget that we're dependent on God as we seek unity in love. We need God.

Jesus' prayer is important for us to hear. It speaks to us right now as we work in our congregation. It speaks to us as we pray for our merger with Lakeside. What a gift - what a promise - that Jesus prays for us! How powerful to consider that even as we've been praying together, meeting each other, planning and preparing, going over the details and asking questions, Jesus prayed for us!

Jesus calls us to be united in love so that we can be effective in our witness. Love is God's character and identity. Love is what God is like and who God is. Love is God's gift to the disciples. Love is how God comes to us and to others. Love is what Jesus prays for his followers to have. Jesus uses the word agape five times!

Agape love is self-sacrificing love. Agape love is cross-shaped - it reaches up to God as a source and out to others as those with whom we share it. Agape love goes to the cross for us and for the whole world - and then agape love brings new life and new hope.

Jesus prays for us and also entrusts us all to God's care. Jesus entrusts the future of the faith community to God - not to the community itself. He knew we needed God's help to be united in love! The only reason we can be united in love is because Jesus and God the Father are united in love. We can't know the extent of God's love without knowing that they are one.

Do we trust in God's help to make us one? Do we rest on God's grace to unite us in love and faith? Jesus prays for the unity and mission of the church in every time and place. He prays that God's vision of love that unifies and reconciles would reign. We can't be effective and vital in our mission to make disciples if we aren't grounded and united in love first. It's the reason for our existence as the Body of Christ. Agape love has the power to transform, to remake us and change the world!

I know that sounds great, but it's hard. Agape love doesn't mean that we believe the same way or that we have the same political leanings. Being united in love is costly because it requires us to trust God and each other in the midst of our humanity. This love is a decision and a choice that we make as we follow Jesus; it's not a feeling when

we sit around and sing “Kum Ba Yah” together. That may feel good, but Jesus calls us to deeper relationship.

Being united in love means that we can be honest and dig more deeply into our faith with the trust that we’re ultimately in God’s care. Brian McLaren calls the church a “school of love.” That’s what we’re called to be - a place where all of us are learning to love God and others more completely - more like Jesus.

It sounds good, doesn’t it? But it takes work. It takes being together, but not being the same. And sometimes it’s hard to be together and not the same! Sometimes it’s hard to believe that we can agree on the essentials of loving one another, but struggle and disagree on social issues - pick your favorite: human sexuality, guns, immigration, and the rest. These are important issues for us to look at through the lens of our faith in Jesus.

And even as we focus unity in love, I invite you to pray. This week, our General Conference begins in Portland, Oregon. There will be worship. There will be disagreement. But I hope, most of all, that people will be united in love.

It would be easy to live in unity if everyone would follow my rules! That’s how I feel sometimes. But then I read Jesus’ prayer again: Jesus says the foundation is love. Our unity is not based on what we follow, but on whom we follow - to whom we are ultimately loyal. We are united in our desire to follow Christ and love and serve in his name and for his sake.

How will God’s love be real if you and I don’t make the effort to show it? How do we show others that Jesus’ love has changed our lives? And that same love has the power to change everyone – with no exceptions!

That’s the power and the challenge of Jesus’ prayer – that through our worship and witness, God will reach people in a powerful way. It is Jesus’ hope for us – to be united in love.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

A Bond of Unity in the Body of Christ

Dear Jesus, You are our Prince of Peace and You prayed for unity in the body of Christ – that we may be united in love just as You are united with the Father - in love

Give Your children the desire to love one another, as You have loved us - for by this will all men know that we are Your disciples.

Give us a hunger to live in union with each another, and may we be united as one, in the bond of peace and fellowship, in the Spirit. This we ask in Jesus’ name.

Amen.