

When I was a young pastor, my second year or so out of seminary, some of the older and wiser pastors of the Presbytery invited me to join a group, and meet with them monthly. Their purpose was to discuss, to plot and plan strategy, to ensure that the decision in our Presbytery went their way on some difficult, volatile and controversial issues, that were approved by the last General Assembly and coming before the Presbyteries for a final decision. The group included some pretty well-known and influential pastors, and being invited to hang out with Presbyterian superstars was exciting and pretty heady stuff for a new pastor. It was a four-hour drive to those meetings, so essentially, I lost a day of doing ministry each time we met, but what an opportunity to rub shoulders and be in the thick of battle with these impressive leaders. The tactics, methods and strategies the group was using were those of a lobbyist, similar to a political campaign. I remember getting caught up with my own sense of eager fervency, to win at any cost, and make those who disagreed look foolish. Nationally, more than 3-million dollars were raised and spent trying to influence the vote in each of the Presbyteries... **but to what end? When the same issues came back up again the next year, I wondered and questioned whether we had really been faithful, and did we actually accomplish anything for the Kingdom of God?**

When I considered all the ministry that I hadn't done because I was too busy and involved with those meetings, and how else that 3-million dollars might have been spent on missions, feeding the hungry or building up churches... **I turned down their invitation to rejoin the group the next year. Looking back, the Presbyterian Church was being torn apart by groups trying to resolve issues of faith and theology by using the same methods and tactics of this world as if the experience of God's love made no difference at all.** We had allowed talking points and strategies taken from this world, to guide and set the agenda for the Church of Jesus Christ, **and had placed more emphasis on scoring a win than on the effectiveness of our Christian witness.** The question that still frustrates and troubles me is this, how can the world take seriously or believe the Good News, **if those who claim** their lives were changed by it **if those who claim** to believe God's word as truth, \* are fighting bitter battles among themselves, or are less than welcoming to all of God's people? If our unity in Christ and God's grace are not the deciding factor when it comes to the really big issues and concerns of life, or dealing with the diversity that makes us each unique, \* **then why would the world take seriously the Gospel message we proclaim?**

All of that came into focus for me the next year when my home Presbytery was voting on these issues again. I happened to be sitting next to a very close and dear friend who'd been a part of my study-group during seminary, and who generally came down on the opposite side of almost every vote that came before the

Presbytery. Although we disagreed fervently on almost every issue that day, **I knew that his heart was in Christ and seeking to be faithful**, and the faith we shared, that friendship and trust mattered more than even our theological differences. In truth it was a wonderful meeting regardless of how the voting went, because we both experienced the blessing and richness of God's empowering presence and grace that day. Years later, I don't remember how all the voting came out, but I do remember very much enjoying my friend, and the way we discussed the business of Presbytery. In fact, it was through our conversation and differing opinions, that we were better able to formulate our own understandings, as we were given a glimpse into the other's perspective. We chose that day, **to discuss rather than debate**, as we sought to understand more than convince each other **and somehow the Church of Jesus Christ has been able to survive even the foolishness of our friendship for decades. I believe God leaves lots of questions unanswered intentionally, and uses mystery, ambiguity, paradox and vague puzzles that help us grow by digging deeper & thinking more clearly.**

Unresolved diversity and ambiguity are gifts to the Church as we learn to connect in unity through the love of Christ, with those who see things differently than we do. **I also believe that is the message and point of John 17, where Jesus fervently prayed for the unity of the Church.** It was just hours before the events of the Passion would begin, and so Jesus was emphasizing the most important lessons that the disciples needed to understand and remember. His prayer sounds like a mother praying for her children, **for soon Jesus would be going away, and he prays for them with the love of a motherly heart. His prayer is for there to be unity among the whole family of faith, as a clear demonstration before all the world of the truth of the Gospel, God's reconciling love for all in sharp contrast to the destructive ways that our world deals with differences.** In the section of the prayer that we read earlier today, Jesus is specifically praying for us, those of us who would become to believers and followers from the witness of Christians before us,

vs. 20-21.

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

**Just as the Father and the Son are distinct yet one in relationship so too, we are each distinct and unique, yet unified by grace.** The same love that unifies Father and Son and Spirit as One God also unifies us as the Church, the body of Christ, without crushing our individual uniqueness and diversity **and that is something for the world to notice, and recognize as a sign of God's gracious**

**love.** We are not saved by our theology, good works or even sound doctrine, but by the grace of God through our union in Jesus Christ. A saving relationship **isn't an act of accomplish, reward or task, but entirely the gift of grace that is grasped through faith**, according to God's own desire and design toward reconciliation. In this passage is not about instructions or commands that we should strive harder to be one and unified by faith, but this text describes **a new reality that God has already accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's a new reality created by God in Christ, in which we may participate, that comes as a gift, a sweet fruit of God's grace.** It is the living effect of God's love and will for us, a unity that is also described in

1<sup>st</sup> John 4, vs. 11, 15-16, 19.

*Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. We love because he first loved us.*

In verse 11, using the word "ought" can be misleading, for a more careful translation of verse 11 would be,

*"Beloved, because God loves us so much, we can love one another."*

**God's love is the foundation for a new possibility of unity.** And so the unity that Jesus is describing is grounded in the love between Father and Son, as it was demonstrated toward us and rather than a forced effort toward Christian unity, we focus on the love of God that binds us all together, into a faithful community that lives in such a way **that the world may come to believe** for when we open ourselves to God's gracious love, then God's love and mercy can flow through us to others **and when we can truly love one another, there are no fences, barriers or boundaries.** So as we read in

1 Peter 4:8~9 (*The Message*)

*Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything... Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it.*

Our call is to faithful wisdom, balance and good will, which is to state with integrity and gentleness the truth as we believe and understand it, while **respecting**

**diversity and differences among God's people which means trusting God's sovereign power and purpose, and that in the end, the truth, God's truth will prevail.** In my Bible, we are never commanded to defeat & destroy our enemies, but rather, Jesus commanded us, to love our enemies which probably includes our sisters and brothers in Christ, even those who foolishly differ and disagree with us, **for Christian unity does not mean or require uniformity.** Today, I am excited, that we are seeing a wonderful example of what that means in the life of our congregation right now for God is up to something new, unexpected & invigorating right here today, at First Presbyterian Church. Even as we are worshiping now together in this sanctuary, the Korean congregation is also worshiping with Rev. Yu in the cinema room, the Spanish-speaking congregation is also worshiping with Rev. Orozco in the chapel, and earlier this morning, in this sanctuary, there was a praise and worship service before this one. There are four distinct worshiping communities each with different and unique ways of celebrating our God, and yet we are surely all of the one body, wonderfully different in our shared unity of faith. Right here today, the people of God are actually being the Church, **and it's an incredible foretaste of God's grace and what we can expect in the eternal Kingdom of God. And I believe we are moving toward becoming the very Church for which Jesus prayed in John 17.** How exciting to see, being enacted the words of

Ephesians 2:19-21,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

We are seeing and experiencing this in our midst, and thanks be to God, we are being blessed **for the authenticity of God's presence and love in our lives, is reflected by our own love and welcome toward other people. Friends, our Christian unity is not an extra or option of faith, but is the very essence of what it means to be Christian.** If we have truly received God's love, then we are also transformed, and we respond to the love that we ourselves have received by loving those others, whom God sends, for us to serve, **for it's in our loving others that we know we are loved.**