

Sermon: “One”
Scripture: John 17: 1-26
Date: May 20, 2007
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On our very helpful “Presbyterian Planning Calendar” we discover that today has been set apart for the annual “Presbyterian Heritage Sunday” observance.

On that same helpful calendar we also find the recommended scripture readings for today, for each Sunday of the entire year, and other Christian holy days.

Being freedom-loving Presbyterians, we are not **required** to observe the special days or read and preach from the recommended scriptures.

Today, however, we will choose to do both – to observe “Presbyterian Heritage Sunday” and study the lectionary scriptures.

Sounds easy enough. I sure thought so until I read the recommended Gospel lesson for today. Today is set aside to remember and presumably celebrate our Presbyterianism, but the passage from John is about oneness—unity—in the whole Body of Christ, the Church.

The Presbyterian denomination, like all other denominations, is not only a product of some division in the Christian church but also continues to be fraught with divisions within our own “brand” of Christianity.

Presbyterians, in fact, are the product of quite a number of divisions. The early church of Jesus’ followers were even divided among themselves. That “one” church became the Roman Catholic Church, which later divided into Western Christianity (the Catholics) and the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the 16th century, Martin Luther broke with the Catholic Church in what came to be known as the Reformation (1517). Thus, the Western Branch of Christianity was now divided within itself. Protestantism was born. The root of Protestantism is protest – not exactly a word indicative of unity!

As we know, even the Protestants – the protesters – could agree among themselves. Lutherans, the Reformed Churches (like Presbyterians), Episcopalians, and Anabaptists were born. And, there are numerous splinters and divisions within each of these groups.

According to the sixth edition of *The Handbook of Denominations in the U.S.*, there are over 250 Christian denominations in the United States. In some cases these Christians will not share the Lord’s Supper together,

acknowledge the baptisms of some churches, or recognized the ordination of each other's ministers, elders and deacons. This is certainly a far cry from what we say we believe in when we recite the Apostles' Creed. We proclaim that we believe "in the one holy catholic church," meaning the universal Christian church, all believers in Christ) and the communion (fellowship of) the saints (all believers past and present). It is also a far cry from what Jesus prayed for in John 17 prior to his death.

According to John, today's Gospel lesson contains the last prayer Jesus prayed for his disciples before he was crucified. Within the prayer he says:

- "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."
- That God and Jesus are one. This fact is basis enough for a call to Christian unity and oneness.
- That the followers will be protected from the evil one (the devil) so that they may be one. He is clear that the purpose of this protection is not take his followers out of the world; rather, that they be protected from the evil one so that they may be one and may be sent as one united force into the world.
- That his followers will be sanctified—cleansed. That his followers would grow in Truth.
- That believers will be united so that the world will know that God sent Jesus and to know that Jesus is eternal life.

Protection from the evil one:

Jesus is keenly aware that the devil is always "looking for an opportune time."

Paul Lindberg says: "The devil is for divisiveness. This is his nature, and it is his purpose. In his own scheming and sinister way he seeks to break to pieces the world that God has made. Jesus Christ is for unity . . . it is his nature. It is his purpose."

Disunity delights the devil. Disunity saps our energy for evangelism and service. Disunity detracts the church from proclaiming the message that God sent Jesus and that Jesus is eternal life.

One writer has said: "A divided church loses persuasive force."

The Presbyterian *Book of Order* (G.4.02031-G.4.0203) says:

“The unity of the Church is a gift of its Lord and finds expression in its faithfulness to the mission to which Christ calls it. The Church is a fellowship of believers which seeks the enlargement of the circle of faith to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone.

“There is one Church. As the Bible speaks of the one body which is the Church living under the one Spirit of God known through Christ, it reminds us that we have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.” (Ephesians 4:5-6)

“Visible oneness, by which a diversity of persons, gifts, and understandings is brought together, is an important sign of the unity of God’s people. It is also a means by which that unity is achieved. Further, **while divisions into different denominations do not destroy this unity, they do obscure it for both the Church and the world.** The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to reduction of that obscurity and is willing to seek and to maintain communion and community with all other branches of the one catholic Church.”

It all sounds great. But a question comes to mind. **How do we have integrity as we pursue unity?**

The breaks which have taken place in the church in the past have been caused by many different forms of disagreement. Some are pretty ridiculous, frankly. But many of the breaks were clearly hard-fought and pain-filled struggles among good people who were trying to be faithful and to have integrity. They were well-meaning people in many cases who were trying to stay true to their understanding of Truth.

I have to stop and ask myself what sacrifices I would be willing to make for the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ. Would I, for example, give up my ordination, stop preaching, and stop leading a congregation? If I were to do so, this would allow us to be united with other churches who believe that only men may be Christian leaders, preachers, and teachers. Could I with integrity lay aside (for the sake of unity) my firmly held belief that the Holy Spirit gifts men and women for all varieties of ministries in the Church?

Each of us would have to come up with our own question or questions. Could we, with integrity, lay aside something we hold dear to be united with other believers who share with us the essential belief that Jesus

is Lord and that to know Jesus is to know eternal life? Tough questions. Perhaps a good starting point would be to simply look at our personal preferences (which may have nothing to do with our theological integrity). Are we even willing to lay aside our personal preferences for the sake of unity in the Body of Christ? This is not sounding very hopeful, is it?

Let's take a moment to move beyond the scope of today's scripture text. I realize that many here today are not so much concerned about the unity of the Church. However, I would guess that we are all concerned with unity – perhaps in our families (immediate and extended), with our co-workers, our friends and others.

In our culture, we are often influenced by the saying, “My way or the highway.” When we are dissatisfied with something, whether it be our marriage, our job, our church, or a host of other things, the natural response seems to be “I’ll just leave.” What happened to unity?

But that tricky integrity question comes back again. Are we in our various relationships with people and organizations to opt for unity at all costs? What happened to integrity?

All of this can really be a downer on this Presbyterian Heritage Sunday. It seems pretty hopeless to ponder all-out unity in the Church of Jesus Christ, when most churches struggle to agree on the color of the carpet.

I found this quote (by either Jerry Goebel or William Loader) encouraging:

“Despite our denominational fractures and the lack of formal unity we may have across the church of today, the fact is that in every hamlet where a tiny congregation gathers in the name of the risen Lord, in every soaring cathedral where hundreds gather, in every mega church that packs in people by the thousands, and in every house church in nations where official church gatherings are banned—in and through and across it all, something quite amazing is happening: the revelation of a divine love that dates back to well before the creation of the world and that will continue on and on into a future in which at some point this same God is going to say, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’”

On this Presbyterian Heritage Sunday, let us pray for protection from the evil one. Let us pray and strive toward unity with integrity so that the

world will know Jesus. Let us pray and strive toward unity with integrity in all of our relationships so that the world may know Jesus.

The Church is one because Christ is one with the Father. While this is true, we are “living into” that reality. It is both “now and not yet.” May we claim this truth and live it by God’s grace. The world is watching. May we be one.