

Pursuing Unity

Our Family Values:

John 17:23, Ephesians 4:2-6

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"I know more than you." Those words stung. I heard them as a youth and as a pastor. As I reprocess those conversations, I realize the speakers felt I elevated myself above them. Their real message was "I don't feel honored by you; and right now I don't want to hear, and I won't be helped by anything you say." These moments of injured pride occur more often than we know. Frequently, people don't vocalize their hurt; but when they do, it reveals our disunity.

Jesus prayed that we reveal something very different. He prayed:

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:23, NIV)

Jesus prayed that God would bring us into complete unity. Our Pew Bibles say "perfected into one." Jesus said our unity would let the world know that God sent Jesus and truly loves us. Does Rochester see? Do the people of this city and region see our unity or our disunity as Christians? Do they realize God loves us believers just like God loved Jesus? Many people believe Jesus had tremendous and unusual favor with God. Do they think that of us?

From its founding, both Methodism and Bethany Church saw unity as a critical value. Methodism's founder, John Wesley, taught that we are love alike and be of one heart even if we are not of one opinion. Richard Harper made church unity the third point of his three-fold founding vision for Bethany (Charter for the Church, October 12, 1958).

Earlier this year, as your church leaders prayed and sought God to know what values should be at the core of our practice, it became clear that *pursuing unity* is one. Read with me:

We value the complete unity of Christ's one church, and our part in it.

Jesus prayed for complete unity. That means acting as one. We are not in complete unity if we just feel good about one another but act independently. Complete unity means that we somehow fit together in love, purpose and commonality.

Look at our commonality. In Ephesians 4, we read:

There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6, NIV)

We share one body, the church. In other words, there is one church in Rochester and many congregations of it. We share one Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. We share one hope, the hope of redemption. We share one Lord who we obey. We share one faith, a Savior and teacher we trust. We share one baptism, where take on the name of Jesus Christ. We share in common one God and Father.

Recently, we as a church have been reading through 1 Corinthians. The whole book addresses divisions. The Corinthian Christians fought. They fought over teaching and baptism. They fought over forgiveness, grace and morality. They fought over business deals with lawsuits. They fought over diet. They fought over communion, worship and spiritual gifts. They fought over their understanding of the resurrection. Satan had these folk tied up into knots.

In the midst of all these arguments, the Spirit of Jesus inspired the Apostle Paul to write 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move

mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, NIV)

In view of church unity, Paul wrote:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7, NIV)

There is something unstated in this description of love. Something is implied, or most of what Paul wrote wouldn't make sense. *Love makes us want to walk together.* If we are not together, why would we need to be patient or kind? Why would we worry about envy, pride, anger, or forgiveness? How can you be offended if you are not relating? Paul writes that love always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres precisely because it is difficult to keep walking together unless you always protect, trust, hope and persevere.

As a father, I have negotiated disputes among my children. Sometimes, they've got in trouble for joining their sibling in some bad behavior. They are not to walk in disobedience. However, they are not to disown their siblings either. They're to genuinely love them, claim them, celebrate their achievements, honor their value and encourage them to walk in obedience. Shouldn't that be true of us?

In 1 Corinthians 1, the Apostle Paul writes:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Corinthians 1:10, NIV)

How can we ever agree if we never talk to one another? So often we reject talking when we don't get immediate results. Must our words control what others think? Does God want my words to control you and your words to control me? God makes us witnesses, not controllers.

God sows into our hearts through the witness of another. Sometimes, we're receptive; sometimes not. Perseverance means we keep talking and listening; for love is patient.

What's more... love protects. It always protects. It protects the value of another. It protects people from statements that harm, degrade or devalue them.

Protection requires that we intervene in a matter, not just remain silent. Sometimes, we remain silent to avoid attack ourselves, and that silence does not convey love to our neighbor or our brother and sister in Christ. Protecting another person can be costly.

Congregational unity is often devastated by two things: what we *say about* one another and what we *say to* one another. Although we may think we are being truthful, we most often gossip or slander a person when we fail to talk to a person directly. When we hear gossip or slander, we can say: *"I love this brother with whom you are disappointed. I so appreciate this and that about him. I'm concerned that if we talk negatively about him, we could hurt him and our church family... even when we are trying to do good. Let's pray that the will of God may be done, that we come to a common mind, and I will go with you to visit him."* We can help each talk to a person directly and be honest, helpful and hopeful.

Regarding congregational and church unity, the Lord commands the following:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
(Ephesians 4:2-3, NIV)

The term "every effort" suggests we're not to give up. We're to recognize that God is fulfilling Jesus' prayer to bring us to complete unity. Let's look for what God is doing. Paul wrote the Corinthians believers not to look at their disagreements from a worldly point of view. They needed to look beyond their disagreements to God who is orchestrating something redemptive. Even when the devil attacks, God is doing something redemptive.

I believe God has taken our church through divisive times so that we will learn to honor one another and grow what builds unity. God is also making our church family instrumental in bringing unity in his church. In the past 8 years God has used Bethany to help Rochester congregations declare their unity, cooperate in prayer, partner in evangelism, and bless the poor. This summer we are partnering with St. Luke Episcopal Church to bless this neighborhood. We also facilitate with our building two ethnic churches. We hope to worship together at least once this year.

When the devil attacked us financially, he hit the entire church of the city. We are the host for a new ministry of 24-hour/seven-day-a-week prayer. The original seed money of \$20,000 for that vision has been tied up in funding our operating deficit. As soon as that money is paid back, we will buy a security system that will allow 24-hour prayer to begin. Imagine what God will do in this city when his people fulfill the words of Isaiah:

You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth. (Isaiah 62:6-7, NIV)

God has made us pivotal to his plan of redemption for this city. Our unity with other congregations and believers will open the eyes of so many people to the redemption of Christ.

Will you pursue unity? Will you make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit? Will you refuse to disown those who claim Jesus? Will you be your Father's instrument of love, faith and unity for his broken children? Will you respond to Jesus' prayer for complete unity with faith that it can unfold right now... through you as you act in faith and love?