



There is a story about a Baptist church in Kentucky some years ago that had a disagreement, which led to a split. Half the congregation left to begin a new church and the other half stayed behind to continue with the existing church. The new church needed a name, and those who remained in the original church decided they should have a new name as well. I don't know if they were aware of the irony in the choice of the new names. One congregation adopted the name Harmony Baptist Church and the other became Unity Baptist Church.

Lest we laugh too quickly we should remember that it is particularly ironic that, in Disciples of Christ churches, we are part of a faith tradition that grew out of a desire to lessen the fractured nature of the American church but which in turn contributed three more groups to the numerous denominations that populate American faith.

Why is it so hard to find unity and a sense of oneness? Why do some churches have such a hard time managing their differences? Why do some churches have such contentious disagreements? Why are the times in which we live so contentious, with so much disagreement and so much anger and so much division? Well, the simple answer is, that's human nature. Humanity has always suffered the ill effects of division and contentiousness.

This morning we continue our four-part series of messages titled *Music of the Heart*, with each message based on a song. This morning's message is titled *One* and is based on the song of the same name by the band U2. I love the music of U2. They have written a lot of classic songs and one of the things I love about their music is the spiritual element that is such a strong part of so many of their songs. They are very open about their Christian faith and it comes through in many of their songs.

The Scripture text for today comes from John's gospel, where Jesus prays for his disciples, just before his arrest, and at the heart of that prayer is his desire that the disciples be *one*.

John 17:11, 20-23 –

11 Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

20 "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,

21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,

23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

I imagine that the lack of unity must grieve the heart of God, so let's talk about unity. First, I want to say that –

1. Unity is not uniformity.

A sense of oneness is at the heart of our Scripture text for the day. Near the end of John's gospel is this long passage – one of the longest passages of the words of Jesus in all the Gospels – in which Jesus expresses many hopes, including that of bringing a sense of unity and oneness among his followers.

In terms of living up to that desire, we have not done very well, have we?

A good deal of the problem, I believe, is our inability to live with diversity. Quite frankly, we don't do very well when it comes to tolerating our differences, especially our differences in opinions. In our present political and social context, it has become even more difficult to find any common ground or to find even the common decency to talk kindly to one another. It seems to me, and I suspect many of you would agree, that we have devolved into a group of competing camps that seem only able to shout at one another.

One of my favorite lines in the song *One* is this – *we're one but we're not the same*. I really like that line. In fact, I love that line, because it reminds us that unity is not uniformity. We are not the same, and you know what? That's perfectly okay! I can't imagine what a world would be like in which we were all the same; if we all looked the same, talked the same, thought the same, and acted the same. But so often we want everyone to be the same. The desire for uniformity is so powerful among humanity. When I was in high school I sewed a patch onto my blue jeans. Back in the 70s that's what we did – we sewed patches onto our jeans. My jeans looked a bit like the bumpers on some cars. You know those cars that have bumper stickers everywhere? That's how my jeans looked – patches everywhere, with different messages. One of the patches said *I'm a nonconformist!* Do you know why I had that patch on my jeans? Because everybody else had that patch on their jeans! There's a lot of irony in expressing our nonconformity through conformity!

So many churches struggle to live with diversity that they fall prey to the temptation to enforce uniformity, which does little more than reduce honesty and authenticity and reduces open and healthy communication. When I was finishing seminary I had an interview with a church and I was very excited about the potential opportunity. The second question I was asked ended the interview. One of the members of the committee asked me a question and I followed up their question with one of my own. The committee member, I will never forget, looked at me and said, *it's a simple question. It's a yes or no answer. If you can't answer with a yes or no this interview is over.* And that was it. There was no veering away from a strict uniformity in theological viewpoint. I don't mind when people ask me questions about what I believe, but I don't like it if those questions are asked to see if I believe "correctly."

There is actually a move in some churches now to ask their members to sign an agreement that they will hold to very specific doctrinal viewpoints and interpretations of Scripture. I can guarantee you will never find such a movement in our church! That some people insist on uniformity – even insisting upon it – is very hard for me to understand?

Some people make the mistake of believing that uniformity is what brings about church unity, but it does not. Read I Corinthians 12:4-31. It is a passage in which Paul writes about unity and he uses the analogy that the church – the body of Christ – is like a physical body. Some people are like the eye, others are like the hand, still others are like the ear, and so on. In that analogy Paul makes a fascinating point, as he writes that unity is not agreement, but each person using their spiritual gift for the benefit of the church. It is the variety – the diversity – of people that actually brings about unity, because the church needs a variety of gifts, as well as a variety of perspectives, and ideas. Sometimes I call people in the congregation and ask them to do certain things or to help me with certain things because I don't

have a clue about how to do them. Imagine if we were all the same – what would we do? Several years ago we had to replace the fire alarm panel in the foyer. Mike Coleman chairs our Administration Committee and it is amazing to me the store of knowledge he has about all things technical. Mike is an engineer, so he has the engineer kind of mind. As we talked about that panel in a meeting Mike was kind of wondering out loud about some of technical aspects of that piece of equipment and said we needed to know the factory default code to the panel to be able to program it. And he said something along the lines of this – *that particular part usually comes from the factory programmed with such and such default code*. Now, on a good day I can spell *default*, so I looked at Mike and asked, *why would anyone know that?* And Mike looked back at me with a puzzled look as if to say, *why wouldn't everyone know it?* Thank goodness he knew that information, as it sure simplified things for us, because I didn't have a clue.

We are fond of using the saying *being on the same page*. I will agree that it is important to have agreement on some things, but not everything. We don't need to be on the same page for everything. Imagine a one-page novel. *It was a dark and stormy night. The winds howled and the rain raged. Suddenly, the door blew open. As Dave turned to face the open doorway, with rain pouring in, a flash of lightning illuminated a figure that filled the doorway. Lightning flashed again, and Dave was amazed as the light revealed the person to be...* Sorry, I can't tell you the rest because it's only one page and that's the end of the page!

Here is a very important point about what Scripture says about unity – it is not uniformity. Things might be simpler if we had more uniformity, but that is obviously not God's intent. The sheer breadth and width of diversity within God's creation is breathtaking!

2. *Unity is found in a common purpose.*

I don't know about you, but there are times I wonder what it would be like to have the ability to travel back in time to enjoy certain experiences. I would love to have the ability to travel back in time to observe the disciples. They were a really interesting mixture. I don't believe Jesus did anything by happenstance; I believe everything he did was for a very specific reason, and that includes choosing a wildly diverse group of twelve disciples. There is much I could say about that this morning, but time constraints do not allow me so suffice it to say this: for all the differences between them – and there were very major differences – we don't read much about those differences in the gospels or get even much of a hint about them. Only a few times do we see the differences between them, and here is why, in my estimation – because there was a common purpose that lifted them above their differences. Show me a church that is full of conflict, dysfunction, and ill health and I will show you a church that either does not know its purpose or has forgotten its purpose.

Unity of purpose is one of the great ways of lifting our vision higher, and that is the problem with some churches – especially unhealthy churches; they simply don't set their sights high enough. When Jesus prayed over and over about the *oneness* of his followers what he is speaking of, I believe, is a unity of purpose, that we would have the same purpose – the unity of purpose – that is demonstrated in the life and ministry of Jesus. The purpose is to speak of and to live the love of God.

Jesus spent every day – day in and day out – for three years with his disciples. Every day trying to plant into their hearts and minds the purpose of God – to love one another, to be people of grace and forgiveness, to reach out to those who are different than us, and to be a voice for the voiceless.

As different as the disciples were they shared a common purpose that helped them to rise above their differences and to work together to fulfill that purpose. There were times that purpose was threatened by the differences. In the early church there was a great deal of hesitation about welcoming the Gentiles who were pouring into the church. They didn't think the same, they didn't dress the same, their backgrounds were very different, and some people, to put it bluntly, didn't want them in the church. Thanks goodness those people did not prevail. But there is always the danger of that attitude taking over

– “some” people are different, and we’re uncomfortable around “those” people, so maybe we should welcome them into our fellowship.

3. *Being one is a testimony to the world about the power of God.*

I find verse 21 to be somewhat unnerving. Did you notice the implication of what Jesus prays in that verse? Listen to it again –*that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* Listen again to that last phrase – *so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* It sure sounds as though Jesus says the world will believe – or disbelieve – in him depending upon our being one. That’s more than a little troubling, isn’t it? Perhaps some of the people who have turned away from the church have done so because they tired of the contentiousness and division that fills some churches. Those of us who have spent a lot of years in church have seen our share of such arguments. We’ve experienced the arguments over the color of carpet, the design of a worship bulletin, and the style of music used in worship. We all grow tired of such arguments, don’t we? Perhaps those who have turned away from the church simply had enough.

Shouldn’t churches be different? Shouldn’t we, as the people of God, remember that we are called to a higher standard and a way of living and relating to one another that reflects God’s will that we be one? I would like to think that churches would set a better example, but I am sometimes disheartened at the amount of division in religious groups and individual congregations. I fear that instead of being an example to our culture, we are merely mimicking its behavior, and much of that behavior is less than encouraging as it is divisive and dismissive of people who are different in some way. I don’t know what Jesus would think about the point at which we have arrived, but I don’t think it would bring him any comfort or joy.

In the hyper-divided context in which we live, is there any hope of creating a sense of unity around anything? I believe there is. We don’t have to agree on every issue, but we can love one another. We don’t have to enforce a particular doctrinal stance upon others, but we can love one another. We don’t have to look alike, act alike, or believe alike, but we can love one another.

If we do so, we can certainly be *one*.