

Sermon for June 2, 2019

Unity is Not Conformity

Acts 16:16-34 and John 17:20-26

Not long after I began serving as the pastor of this church a couple approached me with a request. They wanted the members of the church to recite the same creed in worship every week. They believed that doing so would reflect our unity of belief.

Having been in the United Church of Christ my entire life, I couldn't imagine any congregation in which all of the people were in unity of belief. I also knew that while some Christian churches demand that individuals adhere to a particular creed in order to join, the United Church of Christ has no such requirement. When this denomination was formed the people involved created a Statement of Faith, not a creed. This statement was never intended to be a litmus test for membership.

Knowing that navigating the desires of members can be tricky for a new pastor, I did what any self-respecting UCC clergyperson would do; I took this couple's request to the Board of Deacons. I wasn't taking on this issue alone! After discussing this matter, the Deacons and I made the decision that we would not say a creed every week.

I share this story as a way introducing the topic of unity. In this morning's reading from the Gospel According to John, we find Jesus spending time with the disciples just before his arrest and crucifixion. During this time, Jesus offers a prayer on behalf of the disciples in which he says, "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 sent me."

The oneness, or unity, that Jesus is speaking about is a reflection of the relationship between Jesus and God. This is a relationship of mutual love. By striving to love each other, the disciples will provide a witness of faith for future generations. In reflecting on Jesus' prayer, the Reverend Peter Carman states,

"The last word is love. Jesus does not call for doctrinal unity, organizational unity, or political unity. So often, Christ's prayer for his disciples has been used to sanctify those ends, and even to justify the harsh imposition of artificial unity. Yet this prayer is for unity that grows out of the love of God, received and shared

among his followers, leading to an experienced unity in love between Jesus and his followers, and with the one from who Christ comes.”

(p. 544 Feasting on the Word, Peter J.B. Carman)

Sometimes people confuse unity with conformity. When organizations demand conformity they create a false environment where some individuals are stifled and others are asked to leave.

Considering the people chose to be disciples I don’t believe he was looking for conformity. Some of the disciples were hard working, rough around the edges, individuals who earned their living fishing. One of the disciples was a despised tax collector. Some of the disciples were outspoken, others introverted. One was a Zealot, while others were more main-stream politically. Two were sisters named Mary and Martha.

Just as the original disciples were a diverse group, the development of Christianity in the First Century included a variety of people. These individuals included an Ethiopian who worked for a queen, a wealthy woman named Lydia, and a Roman jailer. None of these people came from the same background, and we can be assured that none of them had the same personality. Each had unique understandings of faith.

The diversity found in the original disciples, and the early church, encourages us to embrace the diversity that exists within the church today. Every one of us is different, and every one of us is important. We don’t have to have the same theological understandings or political views. We don’t have to have the same education level or economic status. We don’t have to be at the same place on the spectrum of sexuality.

Our unity is found in our desire to share the love of God with each other, and with the world around us. Online blogger, Brittany Farmer uses a musical metaphor to speak about such unity. She writes,

“Unlike conformity, unity encourages growth by bringing different people together. If one does not agree with the group—if the group, itself does not come to consensus on every little thing—it doesn’t matter. What matters to unity is harmony. What matters is all of God’s individual instruments coming together to create the most beautiful music. A symphony of difference. A score rich in tone and varying in pace. A song and life of discussion and multiple perspectives. It’s a life and existence that is never stagnant; the unified group is much like an ecosystem—always in flux, yet somehow perfectly contained.” (Conformity vs. Unity: Where Christians Can Get It wrong, April 6, 2009, Brittany Farmer)

Maintaining such unity is not always easy. As humans our prejudices and our fears sometimes get in the way. At other times we are unwilling to set aside our ego and allow other people to share their ideas.

We can find comfort in the fact that the disciples didn't always get it right, nor did the people in the First Century Church always live in unity with each other. Unity is not something that is achieved once and for all. It is a wonderful challenge that we are faced with every time we interact with others. It involves openness to differences, and a willingness to listen. It also means not always getting our own way.

So in case you are wondering about the couple who wanted us to recite a creed every week: When they learned that the Deacons had voted their idea down, they chose to leave this church. I trust they are happy in the church they joined, as it is a church that recites a creed every week.

And just for the record, I am not opposed to including creeds in worship. As long as they are being offered as a way of helping people reflect on what they believe, and not as a litmus test of faith.

