

I served a church in Marion SC, between Florence and Conway, years ago. Marion. Every once in a while we'd have some visitors at worship -- new residents looking for a church home, or vacationers from Myrtle Beach, looking for the Russell Stover chocolate factory in Marion.

After worship, out on the lawn, a visitor would come up to me, say "We've never been to a Presbyterian church before. Kinda surprised at one of the things you do in worship."

"Really? What's that?"

"You stand up and say you believe in the Catholic Church. Why do Presbyterians stand to pledge allegiance to the Catholics?"

Of course, then I get to tell them that creed we're reciting is much older than Roman Caths or Presbyterians. That "catholic" means "universal" as in "all the Christian Churches around the world of any and all denominations." And they'd thank me. And then they'd ask me how to get to the Russell Stover candy outlet.

Here at Oakland Ave Presbyterian, you're used to the Apostles Creed. You know that "catholic" means "universal", not just Roman Catholics. You know how to tell that to your kids when they ask you about that.

Universal. "Uni" = One. "Versal" = Diverse, Different
One ←----- and yet ----- > Different As in

University. Winthrop University. One overall educational institution, One = "Uni"
With many different colleges and majors and academic depts -- Diversity
"Uni - Versity" You get that. That's something like what Jesus is talking about here

In our NT lesson, Jesus is talking about, praying for, the Unity of his followers.
"That they may all be one."

What does this mean? "That they may all be one"

For 2,000 years, the followers of Jesus Christ have been fractured
along ethnic groups & national borders & racial groups & economic classes,
split by doctrinal arguments and organizational setups

Oddly enough, there was a strong movement in American churches, 1950s – 1980s, to take this scripture verse *literally* -- and seek a broad union of protestant denominations.

I don't hear much about the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) anymore, but lots of church bureaucrats spent lots of energy on that effort to create a new & unified denomination, for yrs

I say "oddly enough" because most people involved in this church union effort would call themselves theologically "liberal" -- and yet liberals aren't known for taking isolated verses of scripture "literally" -- and yet, they wanted to take *this verse* literally, and combine many protestant denominations into one new united denomination. Oddly enough.

With that rare exception, for 2,000 years, most Christians realize this verse isn't to be taken literally: "That (all Jesus' followers) May be One."

So. What does it mean? "That all . . . may be One"

Of course, there *are* splits in the extended church family which, sometimes, can be mended.

Methodist Christians in America split, along national lines, 1861, a divided nation fighting its four year civil war. 90 years later, our Methodist cousins re-united north and south, 1950s

It took us Presbyterians longer than that, to "kiss and make up" w our northern Presbyterian relatives. Wasn't until 1983, most Presbyterians, north and south, ReUnited, 122 yrs later.

But I suspect John is pointing toward a goal that's much deeper, much broader, than shifting national boundaries, organizational names, doctrinal squabbles, church branding.

? Do you suppose John's gospel is pointing here, to something like Luke's Pentecost drama ?
(to be explored next Sunday here, Pentecost Sunday)

Luke says the Church of Jesus Christ becomes an extended people
speaking every language, from every nation, of every tribe and race
Each hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ in their own language.

Luke's not pointing to a new combo-language, like Esperanto, no, no

Luke's not saying there emerged a "super-denomination"
The "Always to be United Church of Christ" No no.

Luke, like John here, seems to be announcing: a Unified Focus upon Jesus Christ.
Jesus is Lord. The church is founded upon that.

The lasting and rooted church of Jesus Christ is not gonna be known primarily
in doctrinal arguments resulting in the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed,
the Westminster Confession, the Barmen Declaration, etc, etc

The lasting and rooted church of Jesus Christ is gonna be focused upon the Jesus Creed:

“You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength,
And you shall love your neighbor, as yourself.”

All Christians can agree upon that!

Jesus was very clear in his teaching

that was the Greatest Commandment

that would set his rabbinic teaching apart from the other rabbis.

Could that be what John has Jesus pointing toward, in this verse?

United, in his Creed, his Greatest Commandment?

McDougald Byrd lived by herself across Main Street from the church building in Marion.
When she was a young woman, McDougald loved being an adult advisor to the synod youth
mission conferences of the 1950s. State-wide conferences designed to encourage young
people to become full time missionaries in Africa and South America. Loved those confs.

By the time I was her pastor, McDougald’s husband had died years earlier, no children. Her
children were the teenagers of the 1950s who were now adults serving as missionaries in
Africa and South America. She showed me their pictures with a mother’s pride.

“Art, I’ve saved up some money.” She was an accountant. “While I can still get around, I’m
gonna visit my missionaries in Zaire and Brazil. I’ve got two great trips planned.” She went.

When she returned from her travels, she told the church “It was wonderful to see the vibrant
and growing churches my dear young missionaries had started and encouraged. Each day
we’d go somewhere else and worship. Black. White. Didn’t matter. I couldn’t understand a
word they were preaching, but when we stood up to sing, I recognized most of the tunes, and I
sang along with them, worshiping God, them in Swahili, me in English. It was *wonderful* !

Could that be what John and Jesus are pointing to? Is that what it means, to pray
“That they all may be one” ?

Another year, I drove our church van from Marion to Columbia. Presbyterian and Episcopalian adults in the van. When we got to Williams Brice Stadium, we split up: lay people to sit in the stands, the Episcopal minister and I to a large room under the stands. Hundreds of clergy, all of us putting on our worship robes and stoles. Whoever wanted to come, open invitation. Dozens of denominations. Hundreds of clergy. Thousands of Christians from all over the SE.

During the prelude music, we processed onto the football field, sat as colleagues, as brothers and sisters in Christ. Outdoor worship service. Maybe you were there. Huge stage and banners and speakers and communion table set up in one end-zone. Football stadium turned into an open air sanctuary. Christians of all stripes, black, white, Hispanic, you-name-it, worshipping God, as part of a Papal visit to the US.

You looked around. All sorts of people. Different. Diverse. YET United, in Christ.

That what John and Jesus are praying for?

Some of you know Father John Giuliani, Roman Catholic priest, serves the catholic parish in Fort Mill, lives in the Oratory, four blocks from here, Rock Hill. Father John and I have done some weddings together. Catholic and Presbyterian families. Two friends in ministry. John & Art. Priest and Pastor. Side by side. Two families. Loved ones. Two people, different, yes, but now one household. Yes. United in Christ.

I was a junior in high school. (long time ago). Falls Church VA, suburb of Washington DC. We didn't go to church, our family. Some friends invited me to their youth group. I went. Great!

That summer I was one of a charter-bus-load of high school kids going to a senior high camp, a big ranch, in Colorado. Exciting. I'd never been out west before. 2 ½ days on a bus. Fun!

When we got there, other charter buses were arriving from Philadelphia, Miami, Iowa, California, all over. Wow. Look at all the kids. Urban kids. Small town kids. Suburban kids like us. Kids from all over.

Moved our gear into bunk houses, cabins. Supper in the dining hall. Must be 500 kids. After supper, stood around with our own crowd, watching the other kids. Different.

Evening Program. Sang songs. Funny skit. Some guy gave a talk. More songs.

Later, in a big gym, all 500 kids, standing around the walls.

Big lady steps to the middle of the floor, colorful dress on her like a tent. BIG lady.

Cues some music. Says we're gonna dance. (sure we are!).

One by one, the Big Lady goes to this side, gets a guy by the hand, pulls him along,
Goes to that side, gets a girl by the hand, then another, and another, and finally,
Darned if she doesn't get every kid in the gym,
holding on to each other, dancing together as the music plays on

Jocks & Greasers, Nerds & Cool, Philly guys with spiked black pants,
California surfers with spiked blonde hair. Villager cheerleaders, math geeks,
suburban kids in Weejuns, urban toughs w cigarette packs rolled up in their T-shirt sleeves,
Black & White & Puerto Rican & Oriental kids from the coast

Why? "Because," the Big Lady says, "Because we all belong to the same high school, here,
my friends. The high school of Jesus of Nazareth."

Could that be what John and Jesus' prayer means? "That we may all be one?"

"Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell in unity." Ps 133:1.

And yet: Behold, how HARD it is, to dwell in unity. Church Unity?

The world-wide church of Jesus Christ has such phenomenal diversity, *not agreeing* on all things, but rather: sharing a mutual concern for worship and service

When all hearts are One, then, nothing else has to be One:

Not clothes, not age, not politics, not gender, not race, not mindset

We do not choose our own family. God has made us one family. Like it or not.

If God has done that, then what's our part? (We who are, all, God's children)

Our part is to let go. Let go of prejudices and insecurities, feuds and hates,
and let God lead us into the peace, the freedom, the compassion, God would have us to live

Unity. In unity there is strength. But not Unanimity. Not identical thought.

Unity = a comprehensive communion. World-wide.

While, at the same time, the greatest possible diversity of mind. Followers of Jesus.

I went to a pastor's conference a few years ago. The speaker, a retired minister named Craddock, told about a small church he'd served as student pastor, while he was in seminary, TN or KY, I can't recall which. It was during WWII and there was a big government project under construction near the little church. Tens of thousands of construction workers had come into the area, hard hats, to build this project. Workers lived in their trucks, their cars, in tents. Those who brought their families lived in instant trailer parks.

Beautiful little wood frame church was right near all the excitement. Over 100 yrs old. Little pump organ in the corner. Chimneys. Hand-made pews, from local poplar trees. After worship one morning, the student pastor calls an officer meeting, says "I believe we need to launch a calling campaign, invitation campaign. To all the new people in the trailer parks. Invite those people to church."

"Oh, I don't know," says one of the officers, "I don't think they'd fit in here. They're just temporary construction workers. They'll be leaving soon."

Kid preacher says "Well, we oughta invite em, make em feel at home." Argued back and forth. Decided to think on it, meet again next Sunday, make a decision.

Next Sunday an officer says "I move that, in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county." "Second!" Motion passed. Preacher voted against it, but they reminded him that he was just a student preacher, and didn't get a vote.

Time moved on. Student preacher graduated seminary, went away to serve this church, some years, then that church, then another church. Years later, this pastor and his wife were travelling back through the area, and he took his wife to see the little frame church where he'd preached when he was in seminary. He told his wife the painful, painful story.

The roads had changed. An interstate now went through the county. Had a hard time finding his way. Found the state road, then the county road, then, back in the pines, there it was. Little building, shining white. But it was different.

Parking lot was full, and it wasn't Sunday. Motorcycles. Trucks. Cars packed in.
Out front: Big Sign "Bar-B-Que: All You Can Eat" Restaurant.

So they went inside. Pews were against the walls. Formica tables and chrome legged chairs.
Little organ was pushed up in a corner.

Tables & chairs full of people eating BBQ pork, chicken, ribs.

All kinds of people there: Jews & Gentiles. Parthians & Medes. Persians & Edomites
and dwellers of Mesopotamia -- all kinds of people

Old preacher turned to his wife and says

"It's a good thing this is not still a church.
Otherwise, these people couldn't be in here"

p. 5 – bottom half – inspired by section of sermon by William Sloan Coffin "A Church Like It Oughta Be" 10/12/86 Sermons from Riverside
pp. 6-7 – Fred Craddock, story he told at a minister's conference I attended 1990s; now in a published collection [Craddock Stories](#)

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