

John 17:20-26
May 8, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

In our gospel text today we find Jesus praying. It is His last night with the disciples. He has shared a meal with them, washed their feet, given them a new commandment to love one another as He has loved them, instructed them and answered their questions. He is fast approaching His death yet as Jesus will do on the cross and as He has revealed to His disciples and the crowds that have followed Him throughout His ministry His love is always reflected outward toward the other so it really should not be that big of a surprise when Jesus offers a prayer not on His own behalf for what He is about to experience but rather for His closest friends gathered with Him. Yet, did you also hear that we are included in His prayer? Listen again, "I pray not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word ..." (John 17:20) Yes, on the night of His death as He must have been dealing with plenty of emotions of His own Jesus prays for each of us. He prays for all that are to come and believe in Him. He prays for the church. For the people of God which make up the body of Christ that is the church ... Jesus could have prayed for anything. For instance, He could have prayed for the church to have plenty of money or big buildings, for the church to always have great programs that cater to the needs of everyone or praise bands with a catchy tune and lyrics, or for us to agree on everything.

Yes, He could have prayed for anything at all but Jesus makes it abundantly clear the one thing of utmost concern in His prayer to God is that we be one. His is a prayer for unity but not uniformity.

So many times we associate unity with uniformity. We wrongly misinterpret Jesus' prayer and ultimately we fail to be the church Jesus called into existence. The church which is different from the world. The church that is claimed, gathered, and sent by Christ to be uniquely different from the world around it. In equating unity with uniformity we fall victim to sin and we close our doors to those whom appear different than we do. We proclaim the very same thing that so many in the world do yet today. We erect invisible walls that separate us from our neighbor. We create our own little safety net which closes us off from the world beyond these walls and doors were the Spirit ultimately sends us ... into world in which God is always at work in. Many times we simply do this unconsciously. It is the power of sin to protect ourselves from all that may thwart our safe, comfortable, little microcosm of a world we have done such a good job creating. And all too often it is what we are taught. It is what we have learned. It is what we have even witnessed within the church our whole lives, right? Unity is uniformity. We are comfortable when someone looks like us, acts like us, dresses like us, talks like us, worships like us, prays like us, believes like us, has the same skin color as us, lives in a nice house like us, etc. We are comfortable. We are safe. This is what unity looks like, right? Wrong, this is what uniformity looks like.

I am guilty of falling into the trap of uniformity. It's just easier in so many ways. It's safer. I believe that is one of the challenges the church is facing today. The church is changing, whether we like it or not. God is constantly on the move reforming, transforming, and creating the church God wills. And that doesn't often feel good because it is not the church so many of us grew up in. I may have shared this story before; however, if I did I am going to share it again anyway. It was January of 2007. I was in my first year of seminary and was on a trip with several other of my colleagues and one of our professors in Germany. We were in the heart of the reformation standing upon the very same streets Martin Luther had walked. We were gazing in awe of the very same churches Luther had preached in. It was the first time I had been beyond the borders of America. Now, while we looked very much like the German people we lived among those three weeks we were very different and many made it know we were not well liked or even welcomed. We clearly stood out as American's and tourists and were even shouted out with some rather unfriendly words and several times given a particular hand gesture that led us longing to return home. We were aliens in a strange land. We stayed in Wittenberg for two weeks. This is truly the home of the reformation where Martin Luther taught, preached, and the Holy Spirit began to open his mind to God's grace. My host family had three teenage boys. Unlike many in Wittenberg, they were Christian. One night one of boys who was in high school invited me to go to what essentially was a worship service of young adults in what he compared

to a YMCA. I never did ask him how we knew what a YMCA was but nonetheless I envisioned a complex with a gym, swimming pool, etc. What I found instead was a very small dilapidated building that was the furthest thing from a YMCA. The guilt I harbor stemmed from the fact I didn't really want to go. I was in my mid-thirties and this was going to be a group mostly comprised of teenagers and young adults. Additionally, I was fearful I wouldn't be welcomed and certainly I wouldn't understand the words being spoken and sung. They weren't like me. I had fallen into the trap of uniformity and put up a wall to experiencing the oneness of Christ's church. Thankfully, the Spirit nudged me forward and I went; albeit, still with reservations, fears, and doubts. However, what I experienced is the unity and oneness of which Jesus speaks about today. It's true I stood out like a sore thumb in that room. I didn't have piercings in my nose, lip, tongue, or ears so many of those young people had. I didn't have tattoos adorning my arms or neck. I didn't dress as they did. I didn't speak the same language. They knew it and I knew it. Yet, they were so excited I was there. Their handshakes (and even hugs) were exactly what I needed to calm the fears and overcome the boundaries I had already put in place. While we were totally different there was one thing that made us one and overcame all that separated us. That was the love of Christ. They revealed that love to me. Our unity was rooted in Jesus Christ crucified and risen. On that all things in the church must hinge upon. Had I given into the power of uniformity, I would have missed out on one of the most memorable and transforming experiences of that entire trip. I

would have shut the door on the work of the Holy Spirit. I would have given into the power of sin and evil one. I would have missed out on God's grace and love.

As we, God's people, continue to talk about God's mission and purpose for us in this time and place we must always remember this prayer of Jesus. We give thanks that He prays for us. We trust He continues to pray for us. And whatever that mission is at the center of it all and what the Spirit leads us to do is Jesus Christ crucified and risen. This is where our unity is found. Here, not in anything else. Amen.