

“One”

We try to back each other up around here. At last week’s 11:00 service, following his masterful job with “A Conversation With the Minister,” Matt Mardis-LeCroy let us know that he’d had the opportunity to respond to only a small portion of the questions received. And he told us that we’d better not miss church for a while, because a response to remaining questions could come just about any time between now and the first of the year. Got your back on this one, guy! Here we go.

Actually, this is a question Matt never got to see because it wasn’t submitted with the rest. Instead it was affixed to a bulletin board, where it was discovered at the end of the morning and hand-delivered to my office by an alert and conscientious Deacon. Many of the questions are submitted anonymously, but this one is signed... “St. Paul.” I’ve always wondered whether saints actually think of themselves as saints and assume the title when they sign their names. So that question, at least, was answered. Imagine my chagrin knowing that St. Paul was here and I missed him at coffee hour! Maybe some of the rest of you got to speak with him: medium height, slight build, beard, robe and sandals? He always makes my list of Ten People You’d Like to Have Dinner With.

In any event, here is what was on St. Paul’s mind last Sunday: “How can this faith tradition be 2,000 years old when this church (of Christ) is about 200 years old? Only the Catholics can make that claim.” Because his question was chosen for response, St. Paul has won a free Plymouth Church mug and a full tuition scholarship to the next Discover Plymouth class, beginning in September. Congratulations!

I believe this question is a response to one of our “God Is Still Speaking” posters which says, “Our faith is 2,000 years old. Our thinking is not.” This portrays the United Church of Christ as deeply rooted and refreshingly innovative... perhaps more aspirational than descriptive, but a compelling image, I think. Paul’s question raises the issue that the UCC is a comparatively recent historical phenomenon. (There is no meaningful way in which the UCC is precisely 200 years old ((the Discover Plymouth class will be helpful here)) but the point is well-taken, nonetheless.) The Catholics *are* 2,000 years old, but they are next door, all the way across the alley. How can

we legitimately claim to be part of the same church when obviously we are not? Touché.

This is a very useful question to bring into conversation with this morning's scripture lesson, a portion of Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17. As all good questions do, it points us to an even better question: what does it mean to be One?

Let's admit that this passage from John is tough sledding. If you found the repetition numbing, the imagery confusing and the central point elusive you have a lot of company. It's sort of a theological dough ball: before it even assumes an identifiable shape we're already wearing it. I have spent a god deal of time this week digging into the details of specific words and images, but I will spare you most of that. What matters most here is the big picture.

The setting is Maundy Thursday, the night before Jesus' death. As a part of his farewell discourse, Jesus prays an extended and passionate prayer for the church. Some of this prayer clearly relates to circumstances when the Gospel of John was written, some three generations *after* the time of the earthly Jesus. John's church was engaged in conflict and enduring persecution. They had received from Jesus a message that transformed their lives and called them into community with one another; but it also set them at odds with the world around them. The passage portrays Jesus as leaving his followers behind in the world, but not abandoning them. He prays for them to be protected and to be unified. He prays that they and all who are to follow them in the church may be One.

The church Jesus leaves will be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. Signs of the church's faithfulness will include living in the truth, loving one another, and being one, even as Jesus and God are one. So to turn that around we might observe that to the extent to which the church is not truthful, loving and united, it has failed to become the church for which Jesus is praying.

Not so long ago I heard a wonderful treatment of this passage that I need to cite without attribution. That's because it was a part of an interview for the office of General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. Those of us on the search committee asked all the final candidates to prepare a ten minute sermon as though they would be addressing the General Synod of the United Church of Christ. And we assigned them all the same

text, this passage from John that includes the motto of the UCC, “That They May All Be One.”

All the candidates’ sermons were memorable. But one in particular spoke in terms of Jesus’ “biggest prayer for the church.” Sometimes we pray great big prayers for people we love profoundly, or situations that concern us deeply. These great big prayers are passionate. We pour ourselves into them. And this candidate envisioned Jesus in this passage praying in this way, praying for his people, *all* his people, his life’s work if you will: “... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...” It’s a remarkable vision.

What makes this so unusual is the implication that God is essentially a relationship—an insight that would later be conceptualized through the doctrine of the Trinity. God is not simply a single entity; rather God is a relationship among entities held together so perfectly in the bond of love that they are one. The followers of Jesus are to be one in this same mystical, spiritual way: to participate in the being of God by being united without being the same. How does the prayer go again? “... 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 have sent me.” That’s a great big prayer!

Again, when we turn this idea around it calls us up short: to the extent to which followers of Christ are separate from one another—and particularly to the extent to which we are separate through our own willfulness and intentionality—we are separate from God. Whoops!

Do you see what a huge issue this is? We define ourselves by our differences! Catholics claim to be the one universal and apostolic church; Lutherans are the ones who follow Luther; Baptists are the ones who are sure they get baptism right; Methodists have their special system and discipline; Presbyterians are governed by elders; Congregationalists are *autonomous*... you get the idea. Who are we? We’re the folks who are different from you! And in this determination to get it exactly right, to “have it our way” in consumer parlance, we are surely all getting it wrong.

Consider two extremes. On the one hand are churches who think they’ve got the only true and abiding revelation of God which must be preserved against contamination from worldly thinking and new ideas. It’s the old joke about St. Peter (I wonder if he has a question, too). He’s leading a tour of new arrivals in heaven. He says to his tour group, “Now we’re going to walk past this special compound with the white wall around it; and

as we do I have to ask you to be completely quite.” This being heaven, all the members of the group cooperate. But when they’re safely past the compound, one of them asks St. Peter, “What was *that* all about? Why didn’t you want us to make any noise?” Peter laughs and replies, “Oh, that’s the [fill in the blank] group in there. They think they’re the only ones up here.”

Years ago I was worshipping in a church like that and the passage was that great Christian unity text from Ephesians 4, “There is... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...” I couldn’t wait to hear what the preacher would do with it. But his approach was painfully simple: he kept adding the words “and only”: one *and only* one Lord, one *and only* one faith, one *and only* one baptism, and so on. There’s only one truth, we’ve got it, and whenever everybody else gets in line behind us there will be unity. End of conversation. That’s one extreme.

We’re at the other extreme, and we put it right on our masthead every week with our motto: “We agree to differ.” That’s very appealing when you’re in full flight from folks who want to tell you what you have to believe and what you have to do. But by itself it’s not much help in figuring out what ideas are worth living by and what ideas are just plain toxic. “Live and let live” may be a beginning, but it doesn’t provide a lot of guidance. “God is still speaking” is a wonderful slogan; but does it mean that everything we hear is from God? “God is still speaking,” but how do we listen for the voice of God amid the relentless din of our lives?

So one extreme is authoritarian and autocratic; the other is ambiguous and anarchical. Either way we run the whole gamut from A to A. Either way the church ends up being a reflection of ourselves: our need for absolute certitude—we’ve got the truth; or our insistence on uncompromised autonomy—you’re not the boss of me. Either way *we* end up in control.

And, more often than not, either way we indulge our disdain for folks on the other end of the spectrum: “Those people check their brains at the door... those people don’t believe anything.” You’ve heard all of this, haven’t you? Absolute insistence that we alone have the truth inevitably reduces God’s revelation to our understanding. But polite indifference in theology—oh, you can just believe whatever you want—trivializes the church, reducing its message to niceness and robbing the faith of all power to challenge or transform.

When we cling to these differences we not only separate ourselves from one another, we also distance ourselves from God, because all of us are included in Jesus' great big prayer: "That they may all be one." All. One.

This is why One is such a powerful word, and why this prayer is so profound. It is a constant reminder that what holds us together is greater than simple agreement or affinity. It speaks of unity that binds together things that are genuinely different. This is unity that goes beyond the mechanisms of compromise. It is unity that is a gift of God, a gift that we must seek... or we are less than the church. The only thing that can hold us together is the presence and power of God... which is why Jesus prayed this great big prayer for us.

So... "How can this faith tradition be 2,000 years old when this church ([United Church] of Christ) is about 200 years old? Only the Catholics can make that claim." Actually, only the universal church can make that claim; and then only as it seeks the unity that is the gift of God's Spirit... that they may all be one.

That's why our motto doesn't stop with "We agree to differ." "We resolve to love" because we understand that love is the essence of the Gospel and the surest sign of God's presence. And "We unite to serve" because it is crucial that we act together where we can, even while we continue to work on our differences. So we're old and new, changeless and evolving, many and one... by the grace of God.

Many thanks for your question, Paul. If you visit again, let's do lunch.

Amen

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