



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

We Are One

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

October 4, 2009

Worldwide Communion Sunday

John 17:1a, 10-11, 20-26

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After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, " All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

"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 have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

I used to be part of a weekly preaching group with three other pastors in Nashville. Every Tuesday morning at 7:30, we would gather in KC's office to catch up with one another and then to talk through the upcoming sermon that we would each be preaching. It was as life-giving as any group I was ever part of, and I miss that time together.

I was a part of that group for a number of years, and each year on the Tuesday before this first Sunday in October, we always had the same conversation. Someone would invariably ask the question, "So, are you guys going to be doing World Communion Sunday in your services this Sunday?" And no matter who asked the question, KC always spoke the same answer: "Every Sunday is World Communion Sunday at Westminster."

Theologically, he had a point. We had to give him that. He was speaking the truth that a child in the first congregation I served drew for me one Sunday during worship. He

had drawn me a picture of the “reunion table,” and I’ve not been able to think of the Lord’s Table in quite the same way sense.

This table that we gather around Sunday after Sunday stands at the center of our life together. It is a vivid reminder that every Sunday is world communion Sunday here at Massanutten as well, and we celebrate that all who come in the name of the Lord are invited to feast on this means of grace which God has provided. At this table we celebrate the oneness of the church—a oneness which is rooted in that same grace. And, in our gathering and eating together, we proclaim the truth: Just as there is one cup and one loaf, we also are one.

Theologically, we have it exactly right. But are we putting that theology into practice? Are we living that unity—that oneness—in the way that God hopes we will?

Talking about the unity of the church isn’t easy in our world today. All anyone ever wants to talk about—to focus upon—is the *disunity* of the church. In fact, some would argue that the church’s witness to the broader world denies that the Church is one.

Several years ago I was leaving the parking garage at a hospital where I had been to visit a church member. I wrote my code number and church name on the back of the parking slip—as the hospital had instructed us pastors to do—and then handed it to the guy in the little booth at the garage exit. He looked at it, punched it into the system, and almost let me out. I don’t know if he simply thought a pastor shouldn’t get out of his garage without paying some price, but for whatever reason he decided to ask me a theological question: “I have always heard that the church is one. Is that true?”

I looked in the rear-view mirror—no line was forming. I would have to respond. “Of course the church is one. Our unity is a gift from God.”

“If the church is one, then why are there so many different kinds of churches? And why don’t they get along? And why don’t they work together any more than they do?”

Good questions. I think I would have rather forked over the four bucks to park that morning. Of course, those outside aren’t the only ones who wonder about the church’s unity.

A number of years ago now I was appointed to serve on the board of the Tennessee Association of Churches, an ecumenical group that attempted to build bridges between the various denominations represented in the state of Tennessee. One of my assignments was to write the liturgy for the closing worship service of the annual gathering, and I was excited by the prospects. What better way to display the unity of the church than to worship together?

But before I left the table that day, my excitement was gone. No sooner had I been given the assignment than a series of instructions about what could not be done in our worship service celebrating our unity began to pour forth. At the top of the list was this: “We simply can’t celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Our disagreements about what happens at the Table are far too deep.”

One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of us all. But what has happened to the church—the church that Jesus prayed to God would be one? Even a quick glance at the churches that make up our culture reveal in one way or another that the unity of the church is in short supply. We are more likely to define ourselves against each other

than to celebrate the common ministry to which we have been called.

So what are we to say about the unity of the church? I confess that I thought about saying something like this: “We are one. Even in our separation, we are one. And you either get it or you don’t.” But that seemed a bit harsh, so let me share a picture of what that unity looks like.

And it’s not my picture. It belongs to Jesus, the One who shares this picture in his prayer we read a moment ago. And the image he gives is simply this: God’s love for the church is the same as God’s love for Jesus. Jesus’ prayer, then, becomes a prayer that God, Jesus, and the community of faith will truly be one in love. In other words, our unity and our love go together.

I’ve talked recently of the church I worshiped with while a student in college. They didn’t let simple things get in the way of their unity with other churches in that community. Do you know what I think they knew, and what I wish more congregations knew? I think they knew that there would always be people who came at faith in different ways, who understood God differently, but they were wise enough to see beyond the surface differences to the deeper thing which united them—namely the ministry and mission of Christ’s Church. In their work together, they discovered that what they held in common—what united them—was a common hope that was born in the one baptism of the church.

Someone once said that the only way unity will come about is when we are deeply involved in a purpose other than trying to achieve unity. It’s what Habitat for Humanity calls the “theology of the hammer,” where folks of different beliefs work together in building shelter.

It’s the stuff of churches that are responding to the devastating storms that have caused so much damage in recent years.

It’s the work of the various congregations in this community who support our food bank or HARTS or People Helping People so that people in this community have something to eat, a roof over their heads, and clothes on their backs.

Ultimately, though, the unity of the church is discovered rather than created—it is lived into rather than talked into being—it is embraced as the gift from God that it is whenever and however God’s people use the gifts they have been given for service in the kingdom of God—a kingdom which is always smashing the boundaries of any community that seeks to contain the untamable God who calls us.

It is, as Jesus reminds the church in his prayer, that our future is in God’s care. Instead of entrusting the church’s future to us in his prayer, Jesus entrusts that future to God. In that way, KC is right. Every Sunday is World Communion Sunday. Of course, saying that has a lot more to do with what God has promised us than with anything else we say or do. Our future—and our unity—rest in the care of the God who invites us to let our life together be a witness to the world of God’s never-ending love. May our life together reflect that love in all that we say and in all that we do.