

I. Set Up: This morning we finish our three-week study of John 17 – the conversation between God the Father and Christ the Son in which Jesus prays for us, that we will:

- A. pursue truth – which we looked at last week.
- B. be holy – which we'll take up this fall.
- C. stay on mission;
- D. and number four – today's topic: we will unified:
 - 1. with the apostles - at whose feet we sit.
 - 2. with the Father and Son
 - 3. And with each other – which is our topic this morning.

II. Introduction:

A. John and Janet are in their 50s (like the others I will mention, they do not attend Christ Church and I have changed not only their names, but enough other details that they will not recognize themselves, but the essence of my examples are true, and first hand to me). John and Janet are in their 50s. John got vaccinated but Janet did not. A few weeks ago, he was exposed to COVID. While asymptomatic, he exposed his wife, who while asymptomatic traveled across the country to care for her daughter, who was 24 weeks into a high-risk pregnancy. Janet gave COVID to her daughter and son-in-law, their three kids and their babysitter. Last I heard, Janet was quarantining in a hotel. Her daughter and son-in-law are furious with her and have cut off all contact with John and Janet.

B. Mark and Maggie are also in their 50s and also have three children. A few years ago, one of their daughters came out as gender-fluid. They no longer talk with her or about her. Their recent Christmas card suggests that they only have two children.

C. Steve and DeeAnn live in Illinois and describe themselves as moderate Republicans. Steve's brother and sister-in-law live in Boston and – according to Steve – are deep, deep, deep blue liberals. However, Steve's brother's employer is about to go public, which is setting Steve's brother up for a wind fall, so they are leaving Massachusetts and moving to Red State where taxes are lower. Steve is demanding that his brother stay in Boston and pay for his "crazy liberal policies." They are talking to each other, but just barely.

D. I can go. We could look at statistics about how polarized the country is, I could talk about other fractured families or about churches that are dividing over politics. And I can personalize this and note that some leaving Christ Church have accused me of being "woke," while others leaving the church have accused me of being a member of the Klan.

III. As you know, it's a bit tense out there. And... for that matter, it's a bit tense in here.

A. A few weeks ago, I started tracking what I call the Ambient Anger Index- my read on the amount of tension in the system. I think of it as measure of how full is the glass?

B. I have used this illustration before, noting that if the cup you are carrying around is full. That is, if you are carrying around a lot of anger over just about everything, then when you get bumped, a lot may spill out. However, if the cup is not very full – and especially if it’s empty – then when you get bumped (when someone says something you do not like, or cuts you off, or your iPhone is slow) you do not spill anything on anyone around you.

C. All of this to say - there is a lot of spilling going on right now, and as a result, a lot of people do not want to be around a lot of other people.

IV. And yet... our passage today is John 17:20-23

A. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

B. This is a pretty straight forward passage. There are four things to note:

1. One: Jesus prays for our unity.

2. Two: His prayer is not that everyone everywhere gets along. That would be nice, but that is not what He prays for. What Jesus prays for is that his followers get along with each other.

3. Three: He holds up the relationship between himself and the Father as the model. "...that all of them may be one, Father, just as we are one."

4. And four, He notes that He is praying for this unity so that those on the outside looking in will see in the church something they feel called towards - will see in the unity of the church a validation of Jesus’s claims to be God.

C. So, what does this mean for us?

V. Well, we are not the first to take up this topic. Discussions about unity have been going on for a couple thousand years.

A. If you have read the New Testament, you know that there were a number of flair ups that happened in the early church, such as:

1. the very visible fall out between Peter and Paul over an important topic – the Gospel itself;

2. and a somewhat unimportant spat between Paul and Barnabas that was not.

B. You also know that there is counsel to leaders that makes it clear that some issues cannot be compromised over – there are lots of warnings over false teachers and false doctrines and caution about wolves.

C. And that there are many things that are not worth fighting over. As a pastor I find a lot of direction to hold the church together. For instance:

1. In Phil. 3 we see Paul urging everyone to help Euodia and Syntche to hold it together.

2. In Galatians 3 we are told that in Christ there is: 1) Neither Jew nor Greek; 2) neither slave nor free; 3) neither male nor female. In other words – none of the divisions that so commonly divide us (ethnicity, economic capacity and sexuality) are to keep us apart.

3. In I Cor. 1:10 Paul appeals to his readers in to “agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

D. If we step back and look at all that is discussed under the topic of unity, it seems as though we need answers to three questions:

1. Who are we supposed to be unified with?

2. What are we supposed to be unified about?

3. And three, how we are supposed to pull this off.

VI. Let’s take these one at a time. Number one: who are we supposed to be unified with?

A. As noted earlier, there are lots of calls for political and civil unity. This is not surprising, because lately we cannot agree on establish enough common ground to agree on a common good. But that is not our concern today. The call in John 17 is for Christians to get along with each other.

B. Now, some apply this to the relationships between churches. And that is understandable. After all, there are a lot of churches out there. And they do not all get along. And this is not the way things started, nor does it seem to line up with what Jesus is praying for.

1. As you may know – initially there was a church in an area with a bishop over that city. But there were disagreements and tensions and power plays.

- a) And in the 11th century we had the first big split – the Great Schism, in which the church in the East (the Orthodox Church) went on way and the Western Church went the other.
- b) And then 400 years later the Church in the west split when Martin Luther – a Roman Catholic monk and professor – called on the Roman Catholic Church to reform. And it ended up splitting.
- c) And that the split that Luther led ended up splitting again and again and again and again. Emerging out of the Reformation you have:
 - (1) The Lutherans
 - (2) The Reformed – also sometimes called Calvinists
 - (3) And the Anabaptists
 - (4) And then later you have the Church of England
 - (5) And then later most of the above groups will split and split and split. For instance, the Anglican Church gave birth to the Puritans, who gave birth to the separatist puritans.
 - (a) The joke is: what do you get if you have two Baptists in the room? Three churches.
 - (b) And it's not entirely a joke. According to Todd Johnson of the World Christian Data Base, there are over 30,000 different denominations in the world.¹

C. So, when it comes to unity, some want to focus on unity between churches.

D. However:

1. This is not as bad as some think.

- a) Denominations were set up as a way for people to get along. The general idea is, we agree on the important stuff, but disagree on things like – whether to meet on Saturday or Sunday, and whether to have a bishop or an elder board or both, and – well, 100 other things – but we are agreeing to only speak well of each other.
- b) And today I see real value in having lots of different churches – as long as they are focused on Christ and lift up the Gospel.
 - (1) It used to be that we lived in geographic echo chambers. You had to travel to find people who thought differently than you

do. Today, that person might be living in the same house. And so, you may need different churches to reach people.

(2) And as long as these churches get along, I do not see the problem.

(3) So let me note, our vision is to help fuel a movement that reaches People and Renews Communities. We do not think we can do this on our own. And we are big fans of other churches. We want them to win. As long as they are focused on Christ and the Gospel we are doing what we can to help them grow.

2. You are not really in a spot to do much about the unity of all the different denominations out there. I want us to within this one.

VII. Question Two: What does it mean to be unified? What are we expected to be unified about?

A. Are we expected to agree on everything? No. We do not need to agree on everything. We need to agree on the basics:

1. the essence of the faith and on the mission.
2. In terms of the basics of faith: think Apostle's Creed, or Fence Posts
 - a)
 - b) .

3. In terms of mission, we need alignment. As a church we cannot do everything. Some individuals use their gifts to serve in all manner of ways. We organize around certain things – always around Proclaiming the Good News and Engaging in Good Works. Under REACH it was on: 1) 100,000; 2) starting 10 new churches; and 3) 500 baptisms

B. Does this mean that there are some things worth fighting over? Yes, if by fighting you mean, disagreeing. No, if you mean punching someone in the mouth.

VIII. Question Three: How do we pull this off? How do we remain together?

A. Well, as we get started let me note two things:

1. First, we are not called to create it. In Ephesians 4 Paul writes: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” This suggests that we are not pulling things together. They have been pulled together by Christ. We just have to not allow

what He has pulled together to split apart. We need to work so that the unity that exists in Christ finds visible expression in our lives.

2. Second, note that in John 17 Jesus is not telling us to get along, he is praying that God will keep us together. Which suggests we likely cannot do this on our own.

B. But I think there are things we can do. Let me give you four:

1. Stay very close to Jesus and his mission. Run to Jesus. Get as close to Jesus as you can get. Remind yourself that it is all about him and his kingdom and not about you and yours. Preach the Gospel to yourself.

a) It is my experience that I am more likely to start drawing lines in the sand when I am spending too much time looking in and not enough time looking at Jesus, or not enough time following his example.

b) It is my experience that I start getting drawn into smaller, intramural struggles when I am not engaged in the cosmic battle between good and evil.

c) When we see the big picture, we tend to line up more willingly with other Christ Followers. I mean, you might not like everything about those you are sharing a fox hole with. They may have habits that get on your nerves. But when you start getting shot at by the enemy you forget all of that real quick.

d) Part of the reason we get into so many intramural battles is that we have forgotten there are bigger battles going on around us.

2. Be nervous about creating divisions or joining them. To that end, be very nervous about thinking you are better or more righteously aligned than others. Be very nervous when you find yourself thinking that you are smarter. More holy. More generous. More something. In some way, a better Christian.

a) The people who cause the biggest divisions in the New Testament –the people that Jesus goes after over and over and over again - are the Pharisees who think they are better (more righteous, more holy, more theologically correct) than others.

b) Jesus talks about them – he talks to those who are the most conservative religiously – as if they are cut off from God.

c) I am not saying there is not a right path. I am not endorsing relativism. There are FencePosts. There are lines we cannot cross.

d) But wow do we have to be careful here.

3. Give others the benefit of the doubt.
 - a) Here's an idea. Treat others the way you would like to be treated. I think someone said that once.
 - b) One of the most frustrating things about talk radio – and podcasts and so much of life right now - is the way people demonize their opponents.
 - (1) They ascribe the worst intentions to them.
 - (2) They twist words to mean things they were not likely intended to mean. And then they attack that. No.
 - (3) We need to learn to listen carefully and loving question and learn before we confront and to do all of that very carefully before we publicly attack.
 - c) When I was with John Stott years ago, I confessed to being discouraged about the church and the way people.
 - d) But I have had people say that they heard that I said, “X, and they couldn't believe it.” And I said, “that is because, I did not say it. I don't think I'd say that with a gun to my head.”
4. Choose not to be offended. Really. It's almost that simple.
 - a) In the opening chapter of his book, *Unoffendable*, Brant Hanson writes:
 - (1) Okay. So this may sound like the dumbest thing you've ever read, but here goes: *You can choose to be “unoffendable.”*

C. He said that when he heard this he found the offensive. So I did what any rational, fair-minded, spiritually mature person would do: I scoured the Bible for verses I could pull out to destroy his argument, logically pummel him into submission, and — you know — win.

D. Problem: I now think he's right. Not only *can* we choose to be unoffendable; we *should* choose that.

E. We should forfeit our right to be offended. That means forfeiting our right to hold on to anger. When we do this, we'll be making a sacrifice that's very pleasing to God. It strikes at our very pride. It forces us not only to think about humility, but to actually be humble.

IX. Men and women:

- A. We cannot compromise on the Apostle's Creed.
- B. But we should be very slow to contribute to any kind of division over matters that are not Apostle's Creed level central to the faith.
- C. We should be very slow to speak negatively about anyone, but especially to those who affirm the Apostle's Creed.
1. This doesn't mean that we can't debate and even disagree. It doesn't mean that there may not be times when we have to disagree strongly. That we are convinced that they are wrong about something. This doesn't mean that there are not good reasons for denominations.
 2. It means that we are called to be one with our brothers and sisters in Christ and we need to be careful about undermining that.
- D. This is important to Jesus. He stakes his reputation on it.

Pray for the Afghan Church

- **For faith** – Many believers are being tested. Reports have come in that some have been told by Talibs that they know who they are and are coming for them. Pray that God would sustain and increase their faith. *“May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might...”*(Colossians 1:11)
- **For peace and courage** – Pray for Afghan believers to not lose heart amid chaos and tragedy. *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”* (John 14:27)
- **For perseverance** – Pray for God to give believers not only courage but a gospel-driven, counterintuitive joy in Jesus that leads to deeper faith. Pray that they would not recant their faith, but hold on. *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”* (James 1:2-3)

¹ Timothy George, *Is Christ Divided*, CT, July 2005, p. 31. // BTW, some have argued that his definition is too broad, and that his number is high, by perhaps as much as 25%. OK, so there are 27,000 different denominations. That seems hardly better.