

Today's Scripture represent the last words Jesus spoke to his disciples before they left for the Garden of Gethsemane. You'll remember that in the Garden Jesus will be betrayed by Judas, and he will be taken into custody by the religious authorities.

The other disciples will run away and desert him because they are afraid.

Jesus is not surprised by these events. Jesus knows the will of His Father will be accomplished through the cross and the resurrection. But, Jesus also knows the disciples will be divided and scattered.

So, he prays for them. He prays that God will bring broken and frightened disciples back together. And Jesus also prays that God will bring broken and frightened disciples like you and me back together as well.

I imagine that Jesus prayed with his eyes open. He looked at his disciples and said,

John 17:20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one."

[Jesus is seeing not only the disciples who are in that upper room, but he is also seeing those who down through the ages will become disciples on account of the testimony of those disciples. And Jesus' heart is filled with love and compassion for this mighty community of faith. He looks up to heaven and continues his prayer.]

"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. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 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.

24 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.

John 17:25 "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 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."

## THE PROMISE

The disciples may not have understood Jesus' prayer at the time. But, think about how much this prayer meant to them as they struggled to preach the gospel in an unbelieving and often hostile world.

Even though they denied Jesus and ran away, Jesus did not leave them alone and divided. The risen Jesus brought them back together.

And Jesus gave them a job to do. They would preach the gospel to the whole world.

But, the disciples would not be alone. God would be with them. In Jesus the disciples experienced the glory of God. God was in Christ.

And now the Spirit of Christ was in them. Through their word, through their testimony many others would come to faith.

The God revealed in Jesus would make them one. The God of compassion, love and forgiveness would keep them together in a world that was trying to tear them apart.

Notice that this prayer is not only for those first disciples. It is for us as well. Jesus prays that all those called to faith by the witness of the Word and the Spirit will be united.

This is the promise. The fear and the divisiveness that rules the world need not dominate our lives because God was in Christ and Christ is in us.

## THE REALITY

Unfortunately, the promise seems like a pipe dream. Fear and divisiveness have been with the church from the very beginning.

Indeed, as we read the gospels, we find that there was disunity among the disciples of Jesus Christ before the church was even formed.

I guess the most obvious example is James and John vying to sit on the right and left of Jesus in his glory. The other disciples were indignant at what these two had asked, maybe because they had failed to ask for it themselves.

Now we could chalk up the infighting of the disciples as due their lack of understanding, but even after the resurrection and the ascension there are indications that the disciples were not all that united in their Christian witness.

One of the first examples of Christian infighting is found in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Apparently, the apostle Peter would not associate with some Gentiles whom he had accepted earlier.

He did this not because he really thought it was wrong but because he wanted to "save face" with his stricter Jewish brother.

You see, at that time, they believed it was necessary to be a Jew in order to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. And that meant following Jewish rules, one of which was refusing to associate closely with anyone outside of the Jewish faith.

In the book of Galatians, Paul challenged Peter on his hypocrisy, and this division between Jews and Gentiles became a major source of contention in the early church.

Eventually it was decided by saying that Gentiles could be followers of Christ without becoming Jews, but not without the first church wide meeting and a whole lot of discussion.

Amazingly enough, despite a lack of unity in the church, the church continued to grow. But, settling the Gentile/Jew question did not bring an end to divisive conflicts.

Even as the church grew in numbers through the power of God's Spirit, the church also seemed to grow in its divisiveness as well.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we read about a Gentile church that was extremely divided. The church was divided over loyalty to various charismatic leaders.

The church was divided over moral issues. The church was divided over customs and by social class. The church was divided over issues of pride and power. The church was divided on what constituted proper worship.

Sounds like a rather modern list doesn't it?

In fact, these sound like the very issues that will be debated by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church next year and every year for the foreseeable future.

But, these are issues that divide not only our particular church; they are also the issues that divide other denominations and our country as a whole. We are struggling for unity because we have different views about leadership, morality and the proper use of power.

How can we possibly be as one when we are so divided? The answer is to remember that though we disagree, our disagreements are not nearly as important as what unites us.

## IN CHRIST

And what unites us? For Christians the answer is clear. The call of Christ unites us.

Paul asked the Corinthians some rhetorical questions in order to challenge their foolish divisions that were based upon leader worship.

He asked, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?"

When it comes to unity the witness of the Bible is clear. What unites us is the fact that we are "in Christ."

One of the most common phrases in the New Testament is the phrase "in Christ." I looked it up. The Apostle Paul uses this phrase almost 90 times. And many of those passages are a good commentary on what Jesus is saying in this prayer.

For example Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that there is no “condemnation in Christ Jesus.” (8:1) In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Later in that letter he would write that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (8:39) and that we who are many are one body in Christ Jesus (12:5).

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians we learn another implication of what it means to be in Christ. He wrote, “For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” (15:22) In Christ we have hope not only for this life but also for the life to come.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation ...” (5:17). In that same letter he also writes that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, “not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

This is how being “in Christ” gives us unity. God’s grace as revealed in Jesus changes us completely. God’s grace makes us into gracious people. We bring people together through the power of love and forgiveness.

In fact Paul characterizes the gospel as a message of reconciliation. And this message has been entrusted to you and me. God’s amazing grace brings us together in world that is trying to tear us apart.

#### THE CHURCH’S ONE FOUNDATION

St. Augustine once wrote, “In essentials unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love.”

I certainly agree with the spirit of that statement, but we often disagree on what is essential and what is non-essential. The church is a mosaic of people who have very different views on many topics. We interpret the Scripture in radically different ways.

We will soon part ways if our unity depends on finding common doctrine. Instead, in the final analysis, our unity depends not upon agreement on doctrine but upon love.

Now love is such a “squishy” word that we need to be more specific. We’re not talking about just any love. We’re talking about God’s love as revealed in the life of Jesus. In Jesus we have a concrete, down to earth picture of God’s love.

This is the one thing we have one thing in common. We are one in the love of God as revealed in Christ Jesus.

This is what we mean when we sing, “The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord.” In Jesus we are connected to God, and it is that Divine love that connects us to each other.

## FAMILY SQUABBLES

I know. Sometimes it doesn't feel like love. Sometimes it seems like we are just stuck with each other. The church is the family of faith, but like any other family we don't always see eye to eye.

The day-to-day life of any family is not marked by constant good will and cooperation.

I don't know about your family, but my family disagrees strongly on many important issues.

Many situation comedies on TV exploit this fact. We laugh because we recognize their struggles.

But, at the end of the day the fact that we are family holds us together despite our differences. When the chips are down we will do what is necessary to help our family.

We come together in times of crisis and in times of celebration. We cry with each other and we laugh with each other.

And in between we often disagree.

The church is the same. God has given us unity, but God has not given us a dull uniformity!

God chooses to work through people who differ in what they believe and what they value. God works with real flesh and blood people to bring a message of divine forgiveness and eternal hope and yet have feet of clay.

When John opens his gospel by saying that the Word became flesh, he was talking about more than the fact that God was in Christ. He was also saying that God and Christ are in us.

According to Paul God chooses the weak and imperfect to bring the gospel message.

In this way it is apparent that the power is not in the messengers but in the message (1 Corinthians 2:1-4).

## GOD'S SIDE

We will not find unity by seeking to make others more like us. We will only find unity by trying to make ourselves more like God as revealed in Jesus.

It is claimed that Abraham Lincoln once said, "I do not boast that God is on my side. I humbly pray that I am on God's side." Instead of jumping into a situation with the presumption that God is on our side, we need to be certain that we are on God's side.

Now finding God's side is not as difficult as it might seem. As we have said, God chooses to reveal His side through Jesus. And the way of Jesus dovetails very nicely with the message and the prophets of the Old Testament.

God's side is consistently proclaimed throughout the Bible. God is on the side of those who are oppressed. God is on the side of those who are beaten down by life.

Jesus took the message of Isaiah as his own when He preached in Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19). Quoting Isaiah Jesus said,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

And then Jesus rolled up the scroll and gave his one word sermon. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

#### UNITED BY LOVE

Wherever people lift up others in the name of Jesus, the Scripture is still fulfilled, and there is unity.

For example, think about the churches that serve Daily Meal each month. Those churches differ quite a lot in doctrine and practice.

But, when we lift up those who are broken, when we feed the hungry, we are united.

Acts of grace and kindness not only bring us together; those acts also invite others to be a part of the Christian community.

Soon we will celebrate Pentecost, that day when the Spirit came upon the church. Frightened, discouraged and divided disciples were transformed into bold witnesses by the power of the Spirit.

And greatest testament to their faith was the way they lived. They read the Scriptures together. They ate meals together. And when people needed help they shared what they had with each other.

People noticed. This was a community like no other, and others wanted to be a part of this family of faith. The early church grew by leaps and bounds because their love was evident and real (Acts 2:42-47).

## LOVE IS AN ACTION

Remember that song we used to sing at church camp?

“We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity will one day be restored. And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

That in a nutshell is what today’s lesson is all about. Love defines the Christian community. Love brings us together, love invites others to join and love brings us into the presence of God.

This is how we see the glory of God, through practicing the love of God as revealed in Jesus. Love is not a theory or a doctrine. Love is an action. Love is a relationship with God and with those who need help.

## LOVE BEGINS WITH GOD

It’s important to note that the unity for which Jesus prayed is not rooted in human achievement. Love is rooted in the life of the triune God. God is love.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way, “Christian unity is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in which we may participate.”

Unlike the modern world in which we attempt to create God in our own image, the task of the Christian community is to conform itself to the image of God as revealed in Jesus.

To say it another way, God’s kingdom is coming. Our job is to get with the program.

We in the church should always be realistic about the unity we seek. We will always be on the road to what God wants us to be.

But, believe this. God can and will use us for his glory despite our weaknesses and shortcomings. The power of God’s gracious love is still breathtaking in its ability to unify and heal.

## THE UNLIKELY COUNSELOR

Rabbi Harold Kushner told of something that happened in his youth that made a big impression on him. A business associate of his father had died under particularly tragic circumstances.

Kushner accompanied his father to the funeral. Priests and counselors who were trying to make them feel better surrounded the man’s widow and children. They knew all the right words, but nothing helped. They were beyond being comforted.

The widow kept saying, "I know you're right, but it doesn't make any difference."

Then a man walked into the funeral home. He was a big burly man in his eighties who was a legend in the toy and game industry.

He had escaped Russia as a youth after having been arrested and tortured by the Czar's secret police. He had come to this country illiterate and penniless and had built an immensely successful company.

He was known as a hard bargainer and a ruthless competitor.

But, despite his success, he had never learned to read or write. He hired people to read his mail to him.

The joke in the industry was that he could write a check for a million dollars, and the hardest part would be signing his name at the bottom.

He had been sick recently, and his face and his walking showed it. But, he walked over to the widow and started to cry, and she cried with him. And you could feel the atmosphere in the room change.

The man who never read a book in his life spoke the language of the heart and held the key that opened the gates of comfort where learned doctors and clergy could not.

This is the kind of love that can bring unity in the church and world. It does not require that we be experts. It does not even require superior morality.

What it does require is that we be willing to open up our hearts to the needs of others, to cry with those who grieve and rejoice with those who have reason to give thanks.

Jesus is praying for us to be united in this common ministry and through it we will see the glory of God.

Amen.