

“One Body”
John 17:20-24; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13
6th Sunday of Easter

May 5, 2024
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

We are continuing this morning with our spring sermon series,
Then and Now...

What does the early church [back then] have to teach those of us in
God’s Church [right now]?

And our topic today is unity.

I say it’s our topic today...but unity is something of a topic for us
every Sunday, whether we explore it from this pulpit or not.

Consider for a moment what you’re doing when it’s a minute or
two before worship is set to start—today, at 9:58a—and you’re waiting
for one of the pastors to come out for the welcome and announcements.

Some of you may be sitting quietly at that moment.
Some of you may be rushing in at that moment.
A lot of you are chatting with one another at that moment.
Perfectly fine.

But what happens when one of the pastors comes out and stands in
front of you?

Usually, there’s a hush.
And everyone gets quiet.
I say: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.
You say: And also with you.

How do you say it?
You say it together.

As one body.
It's unity.

If my count is correct, there will be a total of 15 different moments in our liturgy today, when you will either respond together or sing together or pray together, saying something out loud together, never mind listening together...as one church.

Every Sunday, in other words, we practice, whether we're thinking about it or not, our commitment to UNITY.

Now unity has always been on the mind of the church.
Not just the 21st century church.
But also the early church.

The Apostle Paul talked a lot about unity.
As he wrote to the church in Corinth:

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

But not just Paul.
Jesus talked about it.
In fact, he prayed for it.

In the 17th chapter of John's Gospel, on the last night of his life, Jesus offers a prayer. It's a prayer for his disciples gathered around him, but it's also a prayer for YOU...for his FUTURE disciples:

“I ask...on behalf of those who will believe in me...that they may all be one.”

Jesus wanted unity in the church.
Paul wanted unity in the church.

But you and I both know that unity can be a tricky thing, especially when it comes to church.

How many of you remember the pandemic?

How many of you remember how hard it was, during that time, to feel like one church?

Unity is a good thing.
But it's not an easy thing.

So why was it so important to Jesus?

Why didn't Jesus say—hey, I just want you to follow me according to your own preferences, your own ideas...don't worry about church, don't worry about community, don't worry about unity...when it comes to discipleship, you do you.

Why didn't Jesus say that?

Reason number one:

Unity—practicing our faith with people who don't always think like us or look like us or need the same thing I need...it forces us to think what's best for the body, and not just for ourselves. It makes us consider our neighbor's needs before our own needs. It asks us to understand what it's like to walk in someone else's shoes.

For example...

The Rev. Matt Fitzgerald is a UCC pastor, now in Chicago, who once served a church in Massachusetts. And a number of years ago, he wrote an article for *The Christian Century*, telling of the time when a Hollywood location scout showed up at that church's door.

The scout offered Matt's church \$10,000 to shut down their sanctuary for three days, so that they could use the sanctuary to film a scene from an upcoming Adam Sandler movie.

His congregation was embarking on a \$100,000 renovation of their Sunday school rooms, and the money could certainly help.

"I am not the kind of Christian who would boycott a movie," writes Fitzgerald.

"But the church I serve is not mine, and I found myself wanting to protect its true owner...I remembered what a pain it is to rent the church out for *anything*...[so] I ...said no to the location scout. It felt good.

"And then Hollywood called back and offered us \$60,000."

If we received a \$60,000 offer to film a movie in this sanctuary, what should the Session say?? I wonder what kind of response I would receive if I put it to a vote right now?

Would your it be...unanimous?

Fitzgerald convened the board of his church to bring other people in on the decision.

"I stayed on the sidelines," he writes, "frustrated at my own irresolution and slightly embarrassed that my scruples seemed to have a \$50,000 price tag."

A straw poll was taken on the board.
18 in favor. 5 were opposed.

"We spent nearly two hours discussing how difficult it is to find funds in a down economy...what a powerful impact this unexpected

windfall might have on the children of our church...how beautiful our Sunday school might look.

We talked and talked...

Then all of a sudden one of our longtime deacons said, "Look—it seems as if saying yes to this offer is going to hurt some members of the congregation. Not most people. Obviously not the majority. But some people. So I guess the question isn't about a movie. It's about us.

Is \$60,000 worth hurting some of our members?"
Five minutes later the board unanimously voted no.¹

What happened there?

You know what happened.

They considered what it was like to be in someone else's shoes.

That act may not always lead to unity, but it teaches us something...it teaches us to consider someone else's faith, someone else's experience...before we consider our own.

So unity is important for those of us who are already here.

But reason #2:

It's also important for those who are not yet here.

In her memoir, *Girl Meets God*,
the Duke professor Dr. Lauren Winner
tells a story about Billy Graham.

¹ Matt Fitzgerald, "Take the money and run?", *The Christian Century*, October 24, 2011.

Back in 1957, Billy Graham held a revival in New York City. He wanted to bring people outside the faith to Christ, and he expected there would be many new Christians in the fold by the time the revival was done.

HOWEVER, Graham was also concerned about what would happen to those new converts AFTER the emotion and excitement of the revival was over.

So Graham got to work with area pastors, to make sure they would reach out to those new believers...

He met with fellow evangelical clergy, to be sure...

BUT ALSO Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants,
even Presbyterians!

In other words, people outside the evangelical fold.

This may not seem like a big deal to us today, but it was back then.

This is early Billy Graham:

Baptist, solidly evangelical,
educated at Florida Bible Institute.

He was supposed to stay “within the fold.”

Powerful evangelical Christians were outraged.

But Graham stood his ground.

In fact, what he said was that “the fighting, feuding and controversies among God’s people...[are] a very poor example.”

“God has people in all his churches,” said Graham. And “the one badge of Christian discipleship is not orthodoxy, but love.”²

² Lauren F. Winner, *Girl Meets God: A Memoir*, Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2002.

Our subject today is unity.
As you know, today is Music Sunday.
Music Sunday is an excellent day to practice unity.

How many of you are grateful for the wonderful choirs that we have here at Westminster?

If you are, give me an “Amen.”

And how many of you love the fact that our children’s choirs and our youth choir have more children and youth singing in them than perhaps any other church in our denomination?

If you love it, give me an “Amen.”

See, there we are!
Unity!

Now because it’s Music Sunday, this is going to be a shorter sermon than usual. And I was tempted to ask if you wanted to offer an “Amen” to that too...

But that’s not what I want you to do.

What I want you to do is consider the people whom God might be bringing to Westminster in the next year, in the next 5 years.

You haven’t met them yet.
You don’t know who they are.

Maybe they won’t have the same church background as you.
Maybe it will be someone who was wounded by other churches, and Westminster is their last attempt at finding a church home.

Maybe their needs will not be your needs.
I don't know.

But I'd like you to consider what it might be like to be in their shoes.

What made a difference for you when you first showed up here?
What gift can you share,
 what hospitality can you show,
 so that those who are not yet here
 will know the love of God in this place?

You see, I agree with Billy Graham.
The one badge of Christian discipleship is not orthodoxy.
It's love.
The love of God has called you here.
The love of God is calling others here.

And the difference in whether or not they stay...just might be your commitment to unity. To putting aside your own interests, and considering what it's like to walk in THEIR shoes.

Can I get an "Amen" to that too?

(Amen.)