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May they be one – What unity means to God – 9.13.9

In **John 17:20-23**, Jesus lifts up this prayer for us: **²⁰"My prayer is not for them alone, (referring to the disciples with him in the Upper Room). I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that 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. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.**

This prayer shows us that our unity is and has always been one of the most important things in the Universe. If we are united as one, Jesus says, that unity bears witness to the world that Jesus is really God's Son, the Savior. It follows that if we are divided against one another, it sends the message to the world that, just as they suspected, Jesus is just an imaginary friend.

Today we come together in one worship service for the first time in a long time. We have had special days where we had just one service, but as far as our regular schedule, it's been about 20 years and 8 months! It's good to be together again. We needed it.

Does it make us united? Does being together automatically bring us unity? Today I'm going to talk about what unity means to God and what it takes to have it.

What does it take to be united? Let me first talk about what it does NOT require.

We DON'T have to be all together in one service. It's wonderful that today we finally meet together again at the same place and time, but don't think we have to do that to have unity.

Of course **Acts 2:1** says that on the day of Pentecost, all the believers were together in one place, and the King James adds that they were together with one accord, but that was just before the Holy Spirit was poured out and the church began, and there were only about 120 believers. Then Pentecost came, and the Lord added to their number 3,000 people who were baptized into Christ, and immediately they went to three services (two contemporary, one traditional).

Actually what happened was that they began meeting in homes and having gatherings when they could in the temple courts, and soon persecution scattered them throughout the region. But they were still united as one, even though they didn't all meet together.

It was back in 1989 that we began having two worship services, and then from 1997 till 2006, we had three. Yet some of our most-united actions took place during that time. We came together as one body to build this building back in the days when we had three services. We even had a couple of unanimous votes as we moved toward that goal. It was while we were in two services in this building that we came together as one and collected \$25,000 to drill two water wells in Africa, back in late 2006. Not only that, but we have come together and shown our unity at times of great need – when someone died, for example, or someone in our body was hurting, or was in tremendous need. These are times where we proved our unity even though we didn't all know each other.

I bring this up to show you that, just as having two or three services doesn't prevent unity, being together in one service doesn't guarantee it. Unity isn't about you knowing everyone else at Morrison Hill and it doesn't depend on everyone else knowing you. Unity isn't shattered (as some suppose) when someone comes up to you and asks if you're new here, even though you've been a member for years. (Your reaction to that may hurt unity, however, if you get angry about it, but we'll get to that). I doubt that anyone here knows the name of everyone else here. I doubt that anyone here knows the name of everyone else who has always attended the same service as you. Of course we should try to circulate more and get to know others, but we're not doing our job very well if the church isn't always growing beyond our ability to keep up.

So being in one service now is a great blessing. But it isn't the same as unity. Some people say: "Well, having two services almost makes us two separate churches." In some ways, yes, in some ways, no. But either way, we can be united as one.

We DON'T have to share the same political views to have unity. On the surface, that's incredibly obvious, but let's talk about it anyway. I have heard people here say (not recently), "I don't see how you can be a Christian and be a Democrat". I have heard people say (not recently), "I don't see how you can be a Christian and be a Republican." Of course even those who say that know very well that there are faithful Christians in all parties except the Green Party ☺. In fact they usually say these things while scratching their head and thinking about some devoted Christian they know and marveling that they can still vote for so and so. They say: "She's obviously loves the Lord, but I guess she just puts all that aside when she steps into the voting booth". But politics is about compromise, and if we decide to wade into it at all (which we should), we have to ignore some things or compromise on some things, or at least put them aside for now and hope that they'll change someday. It's when we don't admit to our compromises that we become tools.

In the early church, people didn't get to vote, and politics wasn't an issue in the same way, but they had some profound cultural differences among them, sometimes in the same congregation, about which Jewish customs to follow, and whether to eat meat that was purchased at the temple of an idol. Paul wrote extensively about such things, but unless the issue was central to salvation by grace through faith, he consistently told them to act in love and make the best decision they could, and he didn't think such things should be a threat to unity. Such things COULD be a threat to unity, but that depended on how people reacted to them, how they treated each other. That's still true. But we don't have to share the same political views to have unity.

And here's a good one:

We DON'T have to share musical taste to have unity. Music can get under your skin. Did you ever get into a car with someone who insisted on blasting a CD of someone you don't like? And you're thinking, "If I have to listen to Katy Perry one more time, there's going to be some road rage!" One of the ways the military breaks down the will of someone they want to interrogate is that they'll blast their cell with loud music. If they really want to break someone down, they'll play Willie Nelson (even though the UN technically considers that torture!)

Music is tough to agree upon. But if you have unity in your family, you've probably managed to overcome this. I have rarely liked the same music as my Mom and Dad, and vice versa, but this in no way ruptured our unity. However, since music wasn't all that important to any of us, that wasn't so hard. We could listen to what we wanted on our own and try to be considerate of each other. It wasn't that hard. If music is more important to the people in your house, it just means you have to practice being more considerate of one another and work a little to appreciate something that doesn't appeal to you. It doesn't take shared musical tastes to unite us, but I have seen music used as an excuse to divide.

So what does it take to achieve that unity that Christ prayed for, that God longs for, and that the world needs to see even if it doesn't know it? Let me offer up these three requirements:

1. A shared loyalty. Paul says in **Philippians 2:1-3** - **¹If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.** If I'm looking for a good definition of humility, I'd zero in on that phrase "having the same love". How is it that you can stand together as a family even when you raise your kids as Democrats and they grow up to vote Republican? It's because you share the same love – for each other, and for the family. And in the church, when we have the SAME LOVE, for God, for his will, for his Word and (therefore) for each other, we can put secondary concerns in their place. That same love, Paul says, causes us to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than (our)selves". If your heart is centered on God's love, then your highest concern about the person sitting next to you is that he or she will be here at church, growing in Christ, even if he is wearing a suit and tie, or even if she is wearing jeans and a T-shirt. You'll rejoice in the fact that people who are lost are being found again, even if the music is a little fast and unfamiliar.

We have a saying in our movement: **In matters of faith, unity. In matters of opinion, liberty. In all things, love.** It's the shared love that at once unites us on the essentials of the Christian faith and at the same time helps us give others the freedom to make their own choices in disputable matters. So it isn't a shared service time that keeps us united, but a shared loyalty to Jesus Christ.

2. A good attitude. **Ephesians 4:1-5** says: **¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.** Now it sounds like he's about to describe a stringent life of moral perfection and spiritual questing. Maybe he's going to talk about getting up at 3a and praying for three hours, and fasting till you see visions. But no. Here's the worthy life: **²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.** Effort? I don't mind effort if it means memorizing the NT, or spending seven days in the wilderness, but effort at being peaceful, at making peace, effort at putting up with others? It sounds so ordinary! **⁴There 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.**

If I'm looking for an accurate definition of a good attitude, I'd zero in on that phrase "bearing with one another in love". Do you know what that means? It means to put up with each other. It isn't very romantic, but it's true, to say that marital love means putting up with litter boxes in your house because someone loves their cats, or putting up with motorcycle parts spread out on a tarp on the pool table because someone is rebuilding the engine of their beloved Harley. And Christian love at church is often expressed less by taking a bullet for someone and more by listening to them tell the same story again in Sunday School. But by the power of Christ we can live a life worthy of the calling we have received and be completely humble and gentle, even as someone tells us that we forgot to shave or that our shirt is too red.

So we need a shared loyalty and a good attitude...

3. A strict dress code. I hate to bring this one up, but how can we be united without a strict dress code? And frankly, we've gotten a bit lax with this. Here's what I mean: **¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever**

grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:12-14). See what I mean about a strict dress code?

When someone suggests a dress code, it usually has to do with girls wearing clothes that are too tight and guys wearing clothes that are too loose. Those things matter, but why do we let people get away with walking in here without wearing any humility, or with their patience too short, or with a revealing lack of love? Why don't you ever hear "Miss, you are not walking out of this house until you get back in your room and put on some kindness and compassion?"

I like the picture Paul gives us of putting these virtues on like clothes. Even though getting dressed is second nature, we all give some thought to what we wear, and we have to take action and put on our clothes before we leave the house. Elsewhere, Paul calls these same virtues "the fruit of the Spirit", and they are the Spirit's work in us, so they start to become second nature to us the more we walk with the Spirit. But still, every day we have to intentionally put on kindness or a forgiving spirit, and especially love.

So we don't need to be in one service to be united, but since we are, let's be united in it. We don't have to share political opinions or musical tastes to be united, and it's in these and some other touchy areas where we have our best chance to strengthen our unity.

How important is that? Think about this: Where else do you ever see unity? How many places can you go where people are so strongly bound together by love that they care for each other and they do their best to be kind to one another even if they have strong disagreements or even if they get on each other's nerves? It happens sometimes, but we have the power of Christ in our midst to have it be our defining characteristic.

Does that matter to Christ?

Remember that he prayed: May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me

The world needs to see our unity. That's so much more important than any personal agenda. So let's show them.

**Prayer
Invitation**