

“Complete Unity”

A sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 3/11/18

"My prayer is not for them alone. 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—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." -John 17:20-23

As I was growing up, as many of you know, I had two men who were critical my spiritual formation: My mother's father, a retired Southern Baptist minister and missionary, a Calvinist and what we called a "hardshell" Baptist; and my father's father, former Southern Baptist minister, then turned Pentecostal preacher. They had known each other as Baptist pastors, but my dad's dad later received the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" and believed in the speaking of tongues and other "charismatic" gifts, which eventually forced him out from the Baptist Church. Divisions within the faith are not uncommon. My dad's dad, my Pawpaw, had done monumental things as a Baptist pastor. He pastored Cleveland Heights Baptist Church in Gastonia, NC in the early 1960's and welcomed the first member of color, which was revolutionary at the time—an integrated church. My mom's dad, Grandpa, pioneered an innovative ideology in the 70s and 80s regarding the "small church" model, an anti-establishment movement in the institutional church (a very unpopular stance), which garnered him no fame, no reward, but was nonetheless "revolutionary" in its own right—however, rejected by his fellow Baptists. Divisions of thought, divisions of liturgy, divisions of theological approach and practice are not uncommon. In fact, surmising from my new home of Lynchburg, the "city of churches", a place that boasts upwards of 450 churches, there is no doubt that division is more common than unity is. Each church here has its own distinct flavor, culture, beliefs, and practice. But let us focus on one cause of division, though there are many to choose from.

Let us focus on what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. noted as the most "appalling" of causes for church division. He stated that "It is appalling that the most segregated hour in Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." Unfortunately, while much has changed regarding law and race in America, the practice of self-segregation has not. People tend to use church as a place to find the "like-minded", which typically includes race and culture. Very few people look to their church experience as a way to commune with people "different" than themselves. Though, it would seem, Jesus may have given us precedent to do just that—to go outside our comfort zone of both culture and even beliefs. Jesus was certainly not afraid to embrace such change. In John 4, Jesus and his disciples purposefully travel through the less desirable area called Samaria. The Samaritans were a different race of people, a different religion even. Yet, Jesus was drawn there. The Samaritans were considered a "lesser" race by many in first Century Judea, so it was interesting when Jesus intentionally wanted to engage the Samaritans. It's obvious from Scripture that the disciples were perplexed with Jesus' interest in this other race of people. And Jesus immediately treated the Samaritans as equals, asking to drink from the

Samaritan woman's own jar, which was a major cultural taboo, since the Samaritans were considered "unclean". Jesus wanted to drink from the same water-fountain. He wanted to "swim in the same pool", eat in the same restaurant, share the same utensils even. Jesus was intentional in showing this equality. We are all humans; we are all acceptable; we are all worthy. It seems from this account that Jesus wasn't interested in converting the Samaritans from their own religion. Even though the woman at the well wanted desperately to understand why Jews said the Samaritans should worship like they do, Jesus circumvents the proposition with a proposal of his own: It's not about where you worship or how you worship as long as you "worship in spirit and in truth". He didn't say you had to become "Jewish" or to become what would later be called "Christian" in order to find greater favor with God. He seemed to imply that regardless of your faith tradition, approach God with true authenticity. This is what God seeks. He seeks you!

Jesus stayed on in Samaria for days, the Scripture says. There is little doubt that he stayed in their homes and intimately fellowshiped with the people there. His time in Samaria and activities with the Samaritans seems to have become well known because later in John 7, when some of the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Saducees were keen to get under Jesus' skin, they accused him of being in fact "Samaritan". However, the most exciting part of that accusation, for me anyway, is that Jesus didn't deny it. He didn't say "No, I'm not". Jesus had in effect at that moment become Samaritan too. The question I have for us is "Can we become Samaritan?"

Such a proposition is not easy. Becoming Samaritan is a controversial notion. It would mean in many ways, being intentional in our affirmation and adoption of others, their cultures, their values, their practices. How did Jesus become Samaritan and yet remain Jewish? Jesus taught us true humility comes with how we approach others. Recognizing where they are and who they are, finding bridges, and then crossing them. To not be afraid to embrace others, even if people judge you for it. Stay strong with this truth, "complete unity" comes with a price, but its worth it.

In our study of the Gospel of Mark on Wednesdays, we were able to hone in on the opening passage which contextualizes Jesus' Gospel, his message of Good News. The opening verses frame the message nicely in quoting the passage from Isaiah 40, "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—". However, in our study, we learned that this passage was well known at the time, and the following verse in Isaiah 40 carry with it a richer, fuller context, that should not be ignored, the idea of "justice". The prophet Isaiah said, "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low". In other words, that a great equalization was to come, and has come through the message of Jesus. Dr. King in his famous "I have a Dream" speech highlighted this very truth:

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

Dr. King's very dream of equality was wrapped in the justice prophesied by Isaiah and proclaimed by Jesus. The day of unity is now. The Good News is this, we are free. And if we are free, what will we do with that freedom? My prayer is that we will join with our brothers and sisters of other faiths, other races, other cultures, other languages, other practices, and say we are ALL God's creation, God's beloved. We are in this together. If you hurt, I hurt. If you struggle, I struggle. If you rejoice, I rejoice with you.

Jesus prayed "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."

May our prayer reflect the same spirit. What is your personal prayer for this community in light of a call for unity with the others who surround us? May we invoke a call for true love for all people, even the Samaritans who knock at our doors; may we do more than simply open the door, may we in fact give them the door itself as a gift of true equality, with a spirit of "what's mine is yours."