

May 8, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "That They May All Be One"

Much of what I learned about ministry was not in seminary but in the offices of the first church I served.

My wise teacher was not the senior minister, but the long-time church secretary, Molly.

Molly was 80 years old, the daughter and ex-wife of Congregational ministers.

She had grown up in the Midwest and had a delightful no-nonsense approach to most everything.

One day, after I had opened a church council meeting with prayer the evening before Molly said, "There is one rule my father was quite strict about with preachers...Don't preach when you pray. When you pray, talk to God. When you preach, talk to the people."

That lesson has stayed with me over the years and when I read this morning's gospel I thought to myself, "Jesus is preaching when he's praying."

We have to assume that Jesus' words were spoken out loud, because someone wrote them down.

In seeking God's protection and grace for his followers, he cleverly slips in a few important lessons.

When Jesus prays that 'they may all be one' he is certainly petitioning God for the grace necessary for the disciples to deal with the events to come, but I think he is also sending a message to those disciples that they will be better together than divided.

When he says, "the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me," he is reminding the disciples of what they have learned these past few years in his company.

He is encouraging them to remember that they have been chosen, set apart from others with the knowledge of his divinity.

He wants them to remember that he will be with them for all time.

His final words leave the gift of his love..."so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Words of love and comfort.

Perfect for Mother's Day.

Think of all the different ways that you as mothers have tried to convey your love to your children or the many ways your own mother might have tried to reassure you that her love was eternal.

In the end, all you can say is I'm here, forever.

Today's Daily Devotion from the UCC characterizes motherhood this way: But isn't that what mothers do? They nurture us with affection and then nag us out of our comfort zones. They defend us to the hilt and then push us toward our full development. They love us unconditionally and then challenge us to make the best of every condition we face.

This is also what the church does.

We tend to one another, seeing the good in each, witnessing to the potential in every being.

I thought a lot about these words this week, "that they may all be one."

What does it mean to be one?

Certainly not sameness – Jesus would not be advocating for everyone to be identical.

No *oneness* means something else.

When my son was four years old, I agreed to coach his soccer team.

I knew nothing about soccer, but I enjoyed being with my children and I thought it would be more fun to coach than to sit and watch.

I had never played sports, so I didn't really even know how to coach.

If you've ever watched four year olds play soccer you know that each little player goes in his own direction.

I had to figure out a way for this disparate group of mini athletes to think of themselves as a team, to move down the field together.

I came up with an exercise of everyone linking arms and running down the field together.

We did this many times and I do believe, by the end of the season, we had achieved the sense of oneness.

The boys had learned that they were dependent on one another to make it to the end of the field.

If one fell, while we were all linked together, everyone would fall.

If one hung back and resisted the forward movement, it slowed everyone down.

But, when we all put our best effort into moving together down the field – we made it!

This is what I think Jesus is praying for in this morning's prayer.

Please God, let them see that they are so much better together than separate.

Please God, help them to know that they have what it takes to get this work done.

Please God, remind them that I will be with them, always, forever, for eternity.

One commentator put it this way: “God invites us into God’s love, God seeks to heal all that would resist that love, and God calls us to learn to be people who extend God’s challenging invitation to others. This is why Jesus prayed that all believers would be united. When we are willing to do the work of being one – which is hard, painful and transforming work – then our community, our love and our deep connection with one another becomes the manifestation of God’s Reign to the world. If there is any way that we can reveal God’s glory and proclaim that Christ is indeed the world’s Saviour, this is it.”

Jesus’ prayer for unity is the foundation of our United Church of Christ.

Some of you may be lifelong Congregationalists, but my guess is that many of you were raised in a different faith tradition, as I was.

The United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 when four branches of Christianity came together: Evangelical, Reformed, Congregational, and Christian.

A covenant was established.

Our church is based on this covenant – this call for unity - which we strive to live out in this time and place.

Our covenantal relationships are like a wheel with spokes going out in all directions.

We are in covenant with one another to be the Salisbury Congregational Church.

Each one of us, by virtue of baptism, confirmation or membership affirmation has agreed to be in relationship with the gathered congregation for worship and service.

We have a responsibility – one that we committed to – to care for one another.

We are also in covenant with all of the United Church of Christ churches in Connecticut.

We have a responsibility on that level to care about what happens in other churches and communities.

We cannot isolate ourselves and turn away from our neighbors.

While *Congregational Polity* implies autonomy – it does not promote isolation.

Our covenant with the Connecticut Conference is one that is built on mutual support.

The Conference staff provide us with expertise on issues affecting the business of the church, ongoing support for clergy – and churches in search of clergy.

We, in turn, provide financial support to sustain the conference operations.

The third area of covenant within the UCC is the national setting.

Here our covenant is again one of mutual support.

A portion of our contribution to the Connecticut Conference goes to the national setting.

There it is combined with all the other conference donations and used to promote worldwide outreach and Christian action.

Additionally, the national setting provides us with expansive resources for worship planning, bible study, church operations and investment opportunities.

The theme of our covenant in the United Church of Christ is drawn from Jesus' words that we heard in our reading today. "That they may all be one."

This is not a call for conformity, but unity.

One does not mean same – it means one heart – the heart of Jesus Christ.

In the United Church of Christ, we have no creeds.

It is Covenant that binds us together.

We are under God's guidance in Jesus Christ to further the mission of God's love in Christ.

We are called by God to be one, to be united in our love of God and love of neighbor.

So now, you have heard Jesus' prayer – whether it was preaching or not.

You know what it is that he wished for you, so now it is up to you to determine how you will respond.

Will you live out God's wish for you or will you resist?

Can you link arms with the person next to you and cooperatively make your way down the field of life?

Most importantly, when you score a goal, can you share the glory?