

RESURRECTION HOPE – UNITY IN CHRIST

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

April 28, 2024

TEXT: John 17:20-26; Ephesians 4:1-6, 16

When I was growing up, the music program in all the schools I attended was excellent. Each teacher wanted to make sure we had a well-rounded understanding of music and musical instruments. And in particular, we learned about orchestras – and even attended many concerts together – and even went to a few operas together. In High School, I played piano in the orchestra for 4 years and really loved it. All of that to say - I have had a life-long love of symphony orchestras. How many of you have gone to orchestra concerts? If you haven't been to one in person, perhaps you have watched one on TV.

Think about what happens right before the concert begins. All the musicians are there on the stage – and making all sorts of noise as they warm up. Each player is strumming on strings – blowing into horns and tapping tympani. And the chaotic noise you hear – isn't music. Rather, it seems like everyone is playing their own song – or maybe even just playing a variety of notes that aren't even part of a song.

But then the concert master comes in – and everyone gets quiet so that they can tune up. The oboist – (or when I was in high school, it was sometimes my job, as the pianist) plays the standard pitch of “A”. All of the other players listen carefully and then match the sound of their instruments to that standard.

After all are warmed-up and tuned up, everyone awaits the coming of the conductor. The conductor finally arrives, shakes hands with the concertmaster and then steps up onto the podium, and looks at all of the musicians, alert and ready to play. All of their eyes are watching the conductor as he or she raises the baton. The downbeat is then given and instantly, there is music, all the instruments blending into one beautiful harmony. What had once been somewhat divided, discordant notes – out of tune and not together – were now working together in unity to make beautiful music together.

You know, we as believers, are like the instruments in God's grand orchestra. We come from diverse backgrounds, with different personalities, gifts, and experiences. Some may be naturally bold and outgoing, like the trumpets, while others offer quiet strength and support, like the cellos or wind instruments. And within each of us – our human spirits – we may have discordant elements, warring factions that pull us this way and that – and we are out of focus, out of tune – and we are just divided and not together.

But there is hope for our orchestra – the church! We can be tuned to one standard by the Holy Spirit at work in us – as He points to the resurrecting hope we have in our risen Lord. And just as the orchestra needs a conductor - Jesus is the one who unites us in purpose and harmony. The love and unity that we have with Christ and others is only possible because of the resurrection and the faith we have in Christ the Lord. People everywhere need to see the love and unity of Christ in you, in the church, and in everything you do.

We gather today amidst a world often characterized by division. News headlines scream of conflict, communities struggle with social and political divides, and even within the church, disagreements can sometimes create walls. It's easy to feel the discord. Oh, how we need to have resurrecting hope – to bring love and unity into our world.

And that is what we hear about in our Scripture reading today from John 17. As you are turning to that Scripture – let me give you some of the context of our story. Jesus and His disciples are in the upper room, the night before Jesus goes to the cross. There He washes the disciples' feet and shares the Passover meal.

Unbelievably, while Jesus was still at the table with them, Luke's Gospel (22:24) tells us that a *"dispute arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest"*. Even here – on the very night Jesus was preparing to offer His life for them – there was tension and division.

Reading John 13-16, we hear how Jesus then teaches several things to the disciples, including the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit - and calls them to love one another. And then, in chapter 17 of John, we hear one of the last prayers of Jesus before He died. This is actually the longest prayer of Jesus. First, He prays for Himself – that God would glorify Him – restoring Him to the glorious place of honor at the right hand of God, that He had before the world existed.

Next, He prays for His disciples – that God would protect them and that they would be one – just as God and Jesus are one. Jesus knows He is about to leave His believers behind in a very troubled world. He can foresee the upcoming persecution and every temptation they will face. He knows that Satan will work to divide His disciples so He prays for their unity.

But what is amazing is who He prays for next. Follow along as I read to you verses 20-24.

²⁰ "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in Me through their message. ²¹ I pray that they will all be one, just as You and I are one—as You are in Me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in Us so that the world will believe you sent me. ²² "I have given them the glory You gave me, so they may be one as We are one. ²³ I am in them and You are in Me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that You sent Me and that You love them as much as you love me. ²⁴ Father, I want these whom You have given Me to be with Me where I am. Then they can see all the glory You gave Me because You loved me even before the world began!"

What is unique is that the prayer is not just for those who were currently following Him, but He is also praying for anyone who would decide to believe in Him in the future. So, the prayer is not just for Peter, James, and John. This prayer is for you and me. Jesus prays that they, and we, would be unified and one just as He and the Father are one.

And this prayer is for ALL believers. Jesus doesn't want us just to get along with a few people – but that we all may be one. True believers in Christ are one, no matter what name is on

the church sign. God so loved the *world* that He gave His only Son for us. We are all redeemed by His blood and we are all going to the same heaven. Jesus came to unite us under God's love – and to enable us to be a reflection of that love and unity to the hurting and broken world.

It is a bit heartbreaking to read Jesus' final prayer, what He cared about most, and then think about the current state of His Church. I am afraid that we have decided to focus on all the ways that we are different and at odds with one another rather than to focus on the things we have in common. The truth is, living your life with love for God and love of people is no easy task. People will make you angry, people will hurt you, people will disappoint you and offend you, but as Christians we must strive to live in harmony with one another and look for those things that unify us rather than divide us.

Our second Scripture reading from Ephesians 4, Paul tells us we need to make every effort – fight for this unity. Reading from Ephesians 4:1-6: *“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

In verse 2, Paul says that we are to live the calling that has been given to us in the person of Jesus Christ. We must follow the example that Jesus demonstrated throughout His life. We must carry ourselves with humility. We must remain kindhearted. We must have patience with one another.

And we are to be peacemakers – working for reconciliation. We are not to hold grudges – but forgive one another, as Christ has forgiven us. And we are to find ways to build one another up, rather than tear each other down... being eager to maintain that unity we know in Christ. We need to ask ourselves – “Are my words and actions being divisive or uniting? Does it pull people together or tear them apart? Am I focusing on what we have in common and can bring us unity or what could tear us apart?

And Paul says there are 7 things we have in common with our brothers and sisters in God's family: one spirit, one body, and one hope. One baptism, one faith, one Lord and one God and Father of us all. God is over all, and He is in all and through all., including that church member you don't agree with and don't even like. They are divinely worthy, and they are loved by God. That is our hope that draws us together.

So, why is maintaining this sense of unity so vital? Because there are several important benefits to the church. As I close let me share just a few that I found on the internet, summarized in a devotional blog called, “Cornerstone”.

Unity enriches each of our lives. We're weak on our own but we are much stronger together. When we are unified with other believers – we can learn more, grow more and serve more – touching more lives with the love of God.

Unity glorifies God: The Apostle Paul says, in Romans 15:5-6: *“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Note the ultimate goal here. When we're unified, we bring glory to our Father who desires to see His people living in close fellowship with each other.

Unity helps our witness: When Christians are fighting with each other, it can hurt our witness with unbelievers. But when, we instead commit to church unity, we create a beautiful picture for the world of what it looks like to love others like Christ does. It also points to the perfect harmony God intends for the universe, a harmony that will be restored fully one day.¹

When we as Christians live united together in resurrecting hope and love – we create a beautiful song that helps other people believe in the power and the life of Jesus.

May our song indeed be: Bind us together Lord, with cords that cannot be broken. Bind us together, Lord - Bind us together in Love. May our fears, our hopes, our aims be one – our comfort and our cares. Bind us together Lord. Bind us together as one.

PRAYER

Dearest Lord – we thank You for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Make us one, now, Lord. One in Christ – one in our Gospel – one in our fellowship in You. In Christ's name we pray.
AMEN

INVITATION

Jesus prayed that the church might all be one – so that the world might believe! It is our prayer at First Christian that all will feel that unity in Christ and believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of the world. If there are those here today who want to make that great confession, we invite you to come forward now and publicly make your statement of faith. We also invite others, who are looking for a church home, to consider becoming a part of First Christian. Let us all dedicate ourselves to showing the world that we are Christians by our love. Come now, as we stand and sing.

BENEDICTION

Go now in peace,
for Christ has called you to live in peace
among your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Go with the hope of the resurrection,
to bring love and unity to a broken and hurting world.

Go now as one body,
to love and serve God as you love and serve the world!

Resources:

¹*“How to Create Unity in the Church”*,
<https://www.cornerstonesf.org/how-to-encourage-unity-in-the-church/>