

Message for June 1st

The 17th chapter of John is a prayer that has been divided into 3 parts in most Bibles. In the first verses most Bibles have a heading of Jesus prays for Himself or that His Father may be glorified through His actions. The second has to do with prayers for others, namely His disciples at the time. And the third, which we heard today has the heading, Jesus prays for all/future believers. Some Bibles say a prayer for the church.

No matter what the heading the prayer is the same, a prayer for others. Our denomination of the United Church of Christ is founded on this prayer. Way back in 1957, four organized church denominations, the Reformed church, Evangelical, Congregational and Christian went together to form the UCC. This church finds its heritage in German Evangelical and Reformed branch of this merger. Often one will see part of verse 21 in the formation of the UCC, “that they may all be one.”

When I was taking my lay ministry classes some 20 years ago now, we studied the history and merger of these different denominations. While we had much in common there were many differences that weren’t really reconciled. Some churches did not change their names and still are known as ‘Congregational’ rather than UCC. This is the case with biggest church in Iowa located in Des Moines.

This morning, I’d like to look at that phrase a bit, “that they may all be one.”

Perhaps you’ve seen the cartoon of a man being rescued from a desert island that shows his rescuers asking the man about two structures on the small island. “Oh,” he says, pointing to one building, “this’s my church.” “And,” he continues, a little sheepishly, “The other is the church I used to attend.

It is estimated there are about 2.6 billion Christians in the world. Then we find Christians separated into Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox. One major denomination of Protestants currently has 22 different denominational identities just in this country. Another major denomination has 30 different branches just in North America with a new one being added recently because of disagreement.

It's hard to put an exact number of religious denominations in the United States. A conservative estimate suggests there are over 200 Christian denominations alone, and numerous other religious groups, leading to a total of hundreds or even thousands when including all religious affiliations.

One could be very discouraged today as we look at this prayer of Jesus and how He wanted future believers to “be one.” I know I speak often of the divisive time we are living through. Politics being the way it is today often divides into red and blue areas. It can be difficult to hold a civil conversation with someone of a differing political opinion. We can be separated by differences including language, race, cultural heritage, beliefs on the controversial subjects of the day. We engage with others who agree with us. In short, we live in a time where we are encouraged to wall ourselves off from others who are different than us.

Even within the Christian church there is much disagreement. These differences of opinion can lead to bitterness and to estrangement from each other. Christians sometimes find it can be tough if not impossible to hold conversations with each other because of differing understandings of the basics of faith. Too often we cannot find a way to work together because the differences between us seem too great. Much too often, we do not live as one with each other.

I, myself have been at meetings where I found myself in disagreement with others in this denomination. Much of the problem as I see it, is how we focus on our differences rather than what we have in common. Just last week I visited with a lady I hadn't seen for a while. She shared how when she was in her early teens in the late 50's her family moved out of town to the country. The church she had been attending was too far away for the family to attend now, so they attended one closer. Unfortunately she was not very well accepted because she was basically a 'tom boy.' The church frowned on her wearing jeans instead of a dress, plus some other things including her love for horses and dogs. This left her sour towards the thinking of that denomination to this day.

Well, so far I guess I've painted a pretty bleak picture. Sometimes preachers can do that. I guess one time there was a guy who was told by his doctor that he only had one year to live. So he went to his minister for advice. The minister listened carefully and gave this advice. "Go marry the meanest, ugliest woman you can find. Buy a trailer and go live in a desert." The man asked, "Will this help me live longer?" "No," replied the preacher, "but it will make a year seem like forever."

So yes, while there is much that goes against what Jesus is praying for in this scripture, I see some hopeful signs. The first is what I will call a change in attitude towards other Christian beliefs. Generally speaking, I see and hear more acceptance of other denominations. I have heard many times how while someone may not be attending so and so's church anymore, at least they are happy they are attending somewhere else. There is a lot of church shopping these days, maybe not so much around here, but nationwide. My observation is that people are less and less concerned about doctrine and focus more on the atmosphere and mission of a religious institution.

Churches across denomination lines work together in many areas to serve their communities including with food pantries and meals for those in need. The four special offerings we do throughout the year, the outreach, and disaster relief we help provide is coordinated by an ecumenical group composed of many denominations. Groups like the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches work tirelessly to facilitate dialogue, cooperation, and joint action in many areas. World communion Sunday is celebrated on the first Sunday in September to celebrate our unity as Christians. Communion in most Protestant denominations is open to all believers now. And the list goes on and on....

In many ways there is a sustained effort to follow this prayer of Jesus. But like so many things it starts with us. While we will always have our differences, it is my prayer that we can focus on what unites us in every aspect of life especially when it comes to following what Jesus teaches. Amen.