

We're near the end of the school year in America. Most colleges are already finished and high schools will soon coming to an end. Sometimes a high school teacher or college professor will summarize the main lessons of the class at the end of the semester – very helpful when preparing for final exams. In today's lectionary gospel reading from John 17, Jesus has been engaging in last minute teaching since Chapter 13. Chapter 17 is a final prayer to God – but one intended for his disciples to hear. In this prayer, Jesus asks the Father that his followers will be one, even as he and the Father are one. This unity will be demonstrated by love. Not by uniformity. Not by believing exactly alike. But by the love of God incarnate in the followers of Jesus, even as God's love was incarnate in Jesus himself.

Unity in Christ is not something manufactured or forced upon followers but is a spiritual transformation. The letter to the Ephesians picks up on the theme of Christian unity, saying: *Stay eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, bound together in peace.* We are called to be God's saints, not meaning a few special Christians but ordinary members of the church family. Saints are humble people who face their own mistakes and weaknesses, yet who revel in the grace of God. Saints are "holy ones" not because of their own goodness, even though goodness is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Holiness comes from being loved by the holy God, whose love lives in them, even as it did in Jesus during his lifetime on earth.

The Jewish Rabbi Yahoshua of northern Palestine in the 1st c. followed the prophets in teaching that truly honoring the Master of the Universe wasn't just getting check marks for following rules correctly. Fulfilling the Torah was far more than observing commandments or practicing religious rituals. Psalm 68 ⁵Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. ⁶God gives the desolate a home to live in; God leads out the prisoners to prosperity, Where does God dwell? Where can you find God? God's holy habitation is where widows and orphans are, the most vulnerable populations. What actions is God involved in? God is behind providing homes for the desolate. God isn't busy condemning those who have been justly or unjustly judged and imprisoned by society – instead God helps prisoners not only out of prison but into lives that don't stay on the margins but find prosperity.

In John 17, Jesus says he has finished the work God gave him to do – and what work did Jesus do? Being in community with the hurting and those society had harmed. Jesus did the work of healing and outreach. No matter what labels the political or religious systems imposed on individuals, the Rabbi Jesus identified them as beloved children of God, not outcasts but sought after.

Other religions in the ancient world imagined their gods as being on their side and smiting their enemies. Too often both Jews and Christians have pleaded for God to intervene and wreak vengeance on those they see as enemies. But look at the verb usage in Psalm 68 verses 1-2. There is a difference in **making** something happen and **letting** something happen:

¹ **Let** God rise up; **let** his enemies be scattered; **let** those who hate him flee before him.

² ... as wax melts before the fire, **let** the wicked perish before God.

In child-rearing there is a difference between punishing a child for their behavior and letting natural consequences happen to them. I remember struggling to figure out when to intervene as a parent and when and how to let natural consequences occur so my children could learn from what they did. There are scripture passages that indicate God doesn't stop human beings from doing stupid things, but lets us suffer the natural consequences. Just as the times when two siblings argue and the parent determines not to intervene but let them work it out, God, the Maker of the Universe, the Parent of us All, lets us work things out. Just as human parents sometimes resort to yelling from the other room – Don't make me go in there! So the Hebrew prophets warned "Don't make God come down here!" The Christian gospels tell the story of what it was like when humanity did make God come down here – and it wasn't all about retribution and remonstrance as humans feared but about revelation and redemption.

When Jesus prays that his followers may be one, even as he and God the Father are one, he isn't asking for God to use power coercively to MAKE people one. Jesus doesn't pray for God to make everyone alike, to think the same things, to act the same way. The unity that Jesus prays will be manifest is not uniformity. Oneness in Christ does not depend on us all being the same. Tragically, Christians through the centuries have tried to make others think and believe the exact same way they do. Throughout its history, White Eurocentric Christianity has sanctioned things like crusades, holy wars, genocide, misogyny, and slavery. Theologian Brian McLaren: *To state the obvious: Jesus never tortured or killed or ruined the life of anyone, but the same cannot be said for the religion that claims to follow him.*

John Chapter 17 is often called the Great Prayer of Jesus, but the most common verb for 'to pray' in the NT, προσεύχομαι, is not used here. The NT Greek word found in John 17 means to "ask". The root verb ἐρωτάω 1) to question 2) to ask 2a) to request, entreat, beg, beseech. "pray" is a religious term. In John 17 Jesus is not engaging in a religious act, but a spiritual one. Jesus asks for the group and also those who believe through their word to be one, meaning being "in" one another. Not being the same. Not being alike. But being one the way God and Jesus are. The petition is

that those who believe may be in God and Jesus in the same way that God is in Jesus and Jesus in God.

In his translation and exegesis of John 17, Rev. D. Mark Davis notes the repeated use of the Greek word *ἵνα* – "in order that." This describes a purpose, the why and wherefore.

In order that all may be one, just as you, Father, in me and I in you, in order that they also may be one in us, in order that the world may believe that you sent me...

The oneness in Christ is not undifferentiated sameness, but rather an interdependence, a coming together and sharing of what are still distinct elements even while being "one" in Christ. One of the threats to unity in Christ is disregard for variety within community. In language about "having Jesus as my personal savior" there is an individualism expressed that demotes and even negates the understanding of the body of Christ. This individualistic mindset can view others not just as different from self, but as potential enemies. The assumption that real Christians believe like me, think like me, worship like me, dress and act like me, look like me, like the same music that I do is false. In this narrow, prejudiced mindset, if you're not like me, you're not a real Christian. At best, you don't count, and at worst, you're going to hell.

Miguel De La Torre, a professor of social ethics and LatinX Studies at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, wrote a book called ***Burying White Privilege***, with the subtitle, "Resurrecting a Badass Christianity." De La Torre makes the point that white Christians are unaware of how culturally specific our way of doing Christianity is. In his comments about De La Torre's book, Presbyterian Pastor D. Mark Davis says: "*White Christianity*" can refer to a number of traditions that are harmless enough in themselves (and which fluctuate over time): *Worship services that begin precisely at a certain time; one-hour time limits on worship; jello salads at potlucks; reading back and forth during worship; standing and sitting on cue; pipe organs; stained glass; wooden pews (which might explain the one-hour time limit); etc. Some of these traditions are deliberate and scripted; some are assumed and inherited.*

White American Christianity is just one expression of Christianity – but the danger is in assuming that it is the only correct form, and a worse danger is assuming that only part of White American Christianity has it right. Being one in Christ doesn't mean sharing the same culture and exact same values. And the best Christian practices and traditions don't necessarily stem from Western European androcentric culture. Any group that claims to follow the

teachings of Christ but promotes uniformity and insists that others need to conform to their beliefs and lifestyle is heretical.

Sadly, mainstream American culture now views Christianity as a monolithic religion claiming that the only holy scriptures that God speaks through is the red letter King James Version, that life begins at conception, that homosexuality is a sin, that women's God given roles are subordinate to men's – and that not only shouldn't women be in the pulpit, some say women shouldn't have the right to vote!, that creatures other than human don't have souls so they don't go to heaven and God doesn't care what happens to them – since the Rapture is coming soon anyway and this planet will get destroyed and tossed like used Kleenex.

In the United States, the grounds of what Christianity as a whole thinks has been ceded to only a narrow segment, which claims to be the only valid expression of Christianity, and that God is on their side of every moral and political view. Differences in theology and biblical interpretation found in other denominations besides the fundamentalist, literalist wing isn't recognized, let alone the variety of beliefs, biblical understandings and religious practices found even within a particular denomination or a particular church. It is ironic when fundamentalists and Christian nationalists try to force their ideas and ways of life onto not just those within their own group but upon the whole population. Even more discouraging to other Christians and followers of other religious or spiritual beliefs that promote peace on earth, mutual understanding and the uplifting of the poorest and most vulnerable is the lack of love or even civility found in the people and groups within this rigid, right-wing branch.

How can those who truly try to be one in Christ can bear witness in this trying time is a question without a clear answer. Because there's not just one response that fits all the followers of Jesus. Look at the congregation of the Charlemont Federated Church, which is pretty homogeneous – a typical New England church. This church shares not just fellowship but many values in common with each other. And yet, there are still different ideas about what it means to be a Christian, what it means to honor Jesus as an amazing spiritual teacher. The membership of Charlemont Federated Church has lots of viewpoints and lots of opinions – despite how similar the backgrounds of many members are. Oneness in Christ doesn't depend on a doctrinal stance, but the oneness that comes from being Christ-centered. Unity doesn't come from erasing differences, but bridging them. Unity doesn't come from enforcing beliefs or behavior, but from embracing forgiveness, understanding and compassion. So, in order to be one with one another and with the Divine, each person gets to determine for themselves how to build bridges, how to embrace understanding, how to promote

compassion, how to live a Christ-centered life. Each person gets to manifest what it means to be One in Christ in this congregation, and in this community, and in the larger world. Each individual commitment to let the love of God live in them means that together we embody the love of God in a powerful way – power not as coercion but as freeing and empowering.

Unity in Christ does not mean uniformity. Unity in Christ means the compassionate presence of the Holy Other abides in us and dwells with us. Amen.