

“The Polity of Oneness”

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6-2-19

Based upon *John* 17:20-26; *Acts* 15:1-21

When I last preached before the holiday weekend, we considered the role that dreams play in our lives, learning from the story of Peter’s dream about a blanket filled with kosher and unkosher animals, how it forever changed his understanding of the Gentiles. Peter realized that they were not profane as he had been taught; they were saved by God’s grace in Jesus Christ just as much as the Jews were. This week, we get to see how that realization went from being a matter of personal conviction to one of Church polity and practice, and how that act set the stage for how we do Church today. We also get to see how in so doing, Peter and Paul and the others in Jerusalem began to make another dream come true, the one Jesus’ conveyed in the final prayer he offered on his disciples’ behalf before giving his life for them and all humanity on the cross.

Acts Chapter 15 records an event in the life of the early Church known as the Council at Jerusalem. *Galatians* Chapter 2 also describes this Council, but in a different way because that letter reflects Paul’s perspective, not Luke’s. But the fact that both sources mention it, tells us that the Council was significant. According to *Acts*, after Peter’s dream, he continued his ministry to the Gentiles until he was arrested and imprisoned. Thereafter Paul and Barnabas, took up the baton, sharing the good news with Gentiles in Antioch and Lystra and Iconium. So, by the time we get to Chapter 15, the word of God was spreading rapidly. But as it spread it also stirred up controversy because some Christians believed that even if Jesus did want to save the Gentiles, they still needed to become Jewish first. These Christians wanted the Gentiles to be circumcised, and bound by the same dietary laws they were, before they could be a part of the Church.

The controversy became large enough that the apostles from various regions agreed to have a meeting in Jerusalem, the birthplace of the Church, to debate these issues. Paul and Barnabas were there, as was Peter, who had been miraculously sprung from prison by an angel. Peter told his story again and criticized those who were putting obstacles before the Gentiles. Then as the assembly listened, Paul and Barnabas also spoke of their ministry. Finally, James, Jesus’ brother, who was in charge of the church in Jerusalem, came to the podium and made a pronouncement. Citing the apostles’ witness as well as the words of the prophet Amos, James said that the Church would no longer “trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God” with circumcision. He proposed a compromise on some of the dietary laws as well. With everyone then in agreement, all of the missionaries and apostles set out again to their respective territories, ready to share the good news to all people.

The story may not seem that remarkable or interesting to us today. Our generation of Christians tends to be more inspired by stories about personal transformation than ancient lessons in Church polity. But the fact that all of the leaders came together in Jerusalem to hash out their differences in a council meeting which influenced how they all did ministry thereafter, was truly remarkable. Up until that point the Church has existed primarily in the form of little house churches scattered all around the Mediterranean. They were not uniform in any respect, not even

in the holy texts they used, and they weren't really connected either. Christians just practiced faith according to their individual congregations' understandings of the Gospel. Since there were already many different sects under the larger umbrella of Judaism at that point, there wasn't really a religious precedent which made the people feel that unity or connectedness was required.

But there was a precedent set by Jesus, according to our gospel lesson from *John* today. Anticipating his crucifixion, Jesus gives lengthy parting instructions to the disciples in *John*, which culminate in the prayer we heard from *John* 17, known as the "high priestly prayer." Jesus did not pray in *John* that "his cup would pass" as he does in the Synoptics, nor did he pray that the bad guys would be punished for all eternity for what they were going to do to him. Instead he prayed for his disciples. He asked that God would protect them, sanctify them, and make them "one as he was one with the Father." "As you, Father 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," he prayed. "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:21-22).

If you had to diagram this prayer with vectors, which is frequently helpful when reading *John* because of the repetitiveness of his language, the oneness Jesus describes would be cross-shaped. His prayer was that individually, each of the disciples would be one with God in the same way that he was (*the vertical axis*), and that they would also be one with each other in community in the same way, too, (*the horizontal axis*). Their oneness would not come from the fact that they were alike in backgrounds, professions, or politics, because they weren't. Among the disciples there were fishermen, scholars, zealots, tax collectors, and more. Their oneness would not come from the fact that they had all volunteered to follow Jesus either, because according to *John*, God gave them to Jesus before they even knew him, let alone consciously responded to his call. Their oneness would come from God's grace in Christ. Jesus wanted them to be one, for protection, for the indwelling of the Spirit, and for witnessing. This was his dream for their future, that through their unity they would be safer, stronger, and more connected to God, and through them, the world would be too.

I don't know if Jesus' brother James was around to hear that prayer, but he must have known about his brother's dream because when he moderated the Council in Jerusalem, he chose a passage from *Amos* to justify embracing the Gentiles in the Church, which speaks to just this kind of God-given oneness. Amos prophesied that the dwelling of David, the Temple, would be rebuilt one day in such a way that even the Gentiles could seek the Lord. But it wasn't going to be Israel which did the rebuilding, it was going to be God. In other words, James recognized in the discussions at the Council meeting, that the Church was God's rebuilding project in fulfillment of this prophecy. The Church would be a new house for God, a place where God could and would dwell in the hearts of Jews and Gentiles. They would be one with God and one with each other.

Now all we have to do is look around at the thousands of different denominations in the world to be able to see that Jesus' dream has not yet fully come true in the Church. Jews and

Gentiles may have come together; but no sooner did they, than Christian began chopping up the church on other grounds. This is one of the greatest sins of the Church. But the fact that we haven't succeeded in making the Church Universal one does not mean that we aren't called to try. And the first step in trying is recognizing that the Church was never meant to be "a volunteer organization of like-minded individuals," however popular that understanding is today. From the beginning, the Church was supposed to be a diverse community of people called together by Christ to witness to the truth of the Gospel and the reality of God's grace and love.

Drawing on Scripture for its structure, our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), intentionally chose to be a "connectional" church. We do not operate as independent congregations which have nothing to do with each other, nor do we operate as a hierarchical organization in which a single individual or ruling body at the top gets to tell everyone below it what to believe and do. Instead, we weave the needs and desires of the local church with the needs and desires of the larger church by having regional gatherings, called councils, through which we can learn from one another and share our resources.

Our church is a member of Baltimore Presbytery, which is a regional council of approximately 64 churches. At presbytery meetings, elders and ministers from the local churches come together to worship, share ideas and concerns, and work together for the good of our area and the world. At the next level are "Synods," which are composed of several states'-worth of presbyteries. The Synods have financial and judicial roles in supporting the presbyteries. Then at the national level, we have something called the "General Assembly," which is somewhat like the Congress of the Church. It meets every two years to decide the polity and practices of the denomination.

Many people have misconceptions about General Assembly ("GA") because of experience with other kinds of churches. They assume that GA is composed of a bunch of leaders enforcing their desires which have nothing to do with the needs of the local church, or they assume that GA has a particular agenda, either too conservative or too liberal depending on who you ask. But every GA is composed of newly elected representatives from the presbyteries, both conservative and liberal, and almost everything GA decides has to be ratified by the presbyteries in order to become a policy or practice of the Church. So, there is no top-down hierarchy, no theological imbalance engineered by those with an agenda. GA is us and for us. According to our Constitution, the Book of Order, the primary responsibility of GA is "to reflect the unity of the synods, presbyteries, sessions, and congregations of the PC(U.S.A.)... It constitutes the bond of union, community, and mission among all the congregations and councils, to the end that the whole church becomes a community of faith, hope, love, and witness."¹ In other words, the GA is one of the ways we strive to be one, so as to fulfilled Christ's dream for us.

The first General Assembly of the Presbyterian church was convened in 1789 by John Witherspoon, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. The next GA, which will be the 224th, will take place in Baltimore in June of 2020. Since our presbytery is going to be

¹ See G-3.0501), The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II Book of Order (2017-2019) (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2017), 57.

hosting the Assembly, you will be hearing a lot about it in the next year. It is a huge undertaking to host a gathering in which thousands of people come from all over the nation and the world to spend a week in worship, prayer, study, and conversation together as we strive to create policies and practices for the denomination which serve Jesus Christ. We will need hundreds of volunteers to make the event happen. So, you will be hearing all summer about ways to be involved, from joining one of the many planning teams—I am co-chairing the worship team and would love your help—to helping out during the Assembly itself. We will also need to raise money for the event, which is why Baltimore Presbytery is asking everyone to contribute something if they are able. Some people in the presbytery are contributing \$224, since it's the 224th Assembly. But if that's too much, others are giving \$22.40 or something in between. Today is the day our church is taking up a special one-time collection. If you feel moved to contribute, just put a check to Baltimore Presbytery in the offering, and we will collect them all and send them on. Whether you do or not, I hope you will try to attend some of the worship services at GA.

The fact that we are asking for money as part of this event naturally raises the question of whether this is a wise investment, especially when so many people are hungry or hurting in the world. Shouldn't we just help them and skip the week-long conference and ecclesiastical navel-gazing? It's a fair question to which I have three answers. The first is from experience. I have served as a commissioner to General Assembly only once. But it was one of the most inspiring, exciting, and encouraging things I have done in ministry to date. To see people from all over the country come together, joined by those in our sister churches in Korea and Ghana and other nations, is to see the Church at its best. The diversity is spectacular, and the unity transforming. General Assembly is a chance for us to step out of our local church bubbles, and see what the larger Church truly can be with God's grace. Offering people this opportunity is offering them a means of strengthening their faith. It enables us to serve the world better.

General Assembly is also a chance to be reminded of what the Church is supposed to be. If we do not come together at a common table every once and a while, if we do not worship together and spend time getting to know each other, then we cannot be one as Christ was one. It may be a thousand times easier for us to think of the Church as the local church, and to prioritize our needs and theological understandings over those in Colorado or Arkansas or Maine. But our biblical mandate is to be one church, not 9,300 congregations. The Spirit is at work in all of us. When we come together to nurture our connectedness, we get a more complete understanding of that work. Like the proverbial blind men with the elephant, we discover there is a lot more to God's plan than what we can feel and touch separately.

The last and perhaps most important reason for us to support General Assembly and celebrate it, is that our world need its witness now more than ever. We have forgotten in our nation how to talk to people who are different from us with grace and love. We have forgotten how to learn from one another, and how we are all better when we work together. If we ever want to pull the broken pieces of our nation and world together, we need to demonstrate that it is possible to be one and disagree on issues, and that is possible to nurture connectedness while still respecting the individual. The Church has not always witnessed well. But right now, we are

better at it than the secular community. So General Assembly gives us a chance both to stretch our empathy and hospitality muscles, and to provide a helpful and desperately needed example to the world of the way into God's future with hope.

William Sloane Coffin once wrote: "The challenge, then is to recognize that the world is about two things: differentiation and communion. The challenge is to seek a unity that celebrates diversity, to unite the particular with the universal...What is intolerable is for differences to become idolatrous... All human beings have more in common than they have in conflict, and it is precisely when what they have in conflict seems overwhelming that what they have in common needs more to be affirmed."² From the very beginning of the Church, the disciples of Christ made it a priority when there was conflict to seek a unity that celebrated diversity, and to build the Church on common ground. May the Spirit enable us to continue in this mission to be one as Christ would have us be, in the local church, the Presbytery, the General Assembly, and the world. Amen.

² *Animating Illustrations*, cf. "unity," HOMILETICSONLINE.COM, retrieved May 28, 2019 from http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=unity&imageField2=, citing William Sloane Coffin, *The Heart Is a Little to the Left: Essays on Public Morality* (Dartmouth, 2011).