

“The Way of Glory”

Psalm 47; John 17:1-11

May 21, 2023

There are some things that you do early in ministry that you look back on and think, “what was I thinking.” One of those surely came to mind this week as I sat down to prepare this sermon. My first job in ministry was as a pastoral resident at Myers Park Presbyterian Church. What’s a pastoral resident? Well, it’s like an intern but you get paid and, I think, a little more is expected of you. So, I was a pastoral resident and they asked me if I wanted to teach anything. I told them I sure did. You see, at the time I had been taking courses in Reformed Theology and thought I knew a thing or two about it. On top of that, I was cooped up with a bunch of Methodists at Duke Divinity School so I was learning a lot about what John Wesley thought.

So, when the thought of teaching a class came up, I leapt at the opportunity. My class was called “Calvin and Wesley – Who Got it Right?” Which I thought was a brilliant title. I taught that class for about eight weeks. For eight weeks, I explored the differences between Calvin and Wesley, always making sure to demonstrate as best I was able that Calvin was right and that Wesley was wrong. I had hoped to make us proud of being Presbyterians but, in the light of scripture, I got it all wrong.

You see, this prayer is about unity on a lot of different levels. And one of the things about unity is that it can’t be disunified. That’s a contradiction in terms, isn’t it? Which is exactly what the church is right now. I know it’s probably not top-of-mind stuff for many of y’all but did you ever think about just how many Christian denominations there are? I don’t know if Doctor Google is right here but I came up with the fact that there are 200 denominations here in America and over 4,500 world-wide. That’s a lot of denominations, isn’t it?

The proliferation of denominations comes as a result of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries. A group of people got to thinking that the only real source of reliable information we have about God is found in the Scriptures. This caused some great friction with the largest church at the time, the Roman Catholic Church. You see, they place church tradition as co-equal with the Bible. So, they have practices and beliefs that aren’t properly “biblical” in the truest sense of the word.

Over this major issue, the church split into two, Protestants and Catholics. And maybe that would’ve been okay. But you see, once Pandora’s box was opened, there was no stopping things. That’s why we’ve grown to over 200 denominations in America with no shortages recently. Nowadays, I don’t even think that it’s denominations that are causing the most disunity in Christ. With a start-up church on every corner, we’ve got everybody with a Bible getting up and doing what they think is best, rarely engaging with other Christians. And it causes problems.

Did you know that they used to do a contest where they’d see how much weight a horse could pull? Well, one time there was a fair and they were doing this. The runner up horse could pull 4,400 lbs. The winning horse could pull 4,500 pounds. But then someone wondered, “wonder how much they could pull together?” So, they hitched the horses together. Guess what? They were able to pull 12,000 lbs. together. That was more than double what they could do on their own. Two together are stronger together than a solitary horse. Which, I think, is exactly the problem with Christianity right now. We’ve got 4,500 hundred horses all pulling in opposite directions over theology. That’s right, what divides us all are largely minor points which most people don’t really understand to begin with.

We all like to be right, correct. I mean do you remember how excited you got when you were a kid in class and you knew the right answer? Remember how anxious you were to let everyone know that you knew the answer? You’d thrust your hand up high into the air, sometimes going “oh, oh, oh,” with the hopes that the teacher would pick you. I read a funny story about being right in the church from, of all people, science fiction writer Isaac Asimov.

At the appointed time the pastor, the president of the church council, and ten elders met around a magnificent mahogany table in the conference room of the church. One by one the issues were dealt with and on each issue, it became more and more apparent that the Pastor was a lonely voice in the wilderness. The president of the church council said, “Come, Pastor, enough of this. Let’s vote and allow the majority to rule.” He passed out slips of paper

and each man made his mark. The votes were collected and the president said, "You may examine them, Pastor. It is eleven to one against you. We have the majority." Offended, the Pastor rose to his feet and said, "So, now you think because of the vote that you're right and I'm wrong. Well, that's not so. I stand here," and he raised his arms impressively while looking heavenward, "And call upon the Holy God to give us a sign that I'm right and you're wrong." No sooner were the words out of his mouth when there was a deafening clap of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning that struck the mahogany table and cracked it in two. The room was filled with smoke and fumes, and the president and the elders were hurled to the floor. Surrounded by rubble the Pastor stood erect and untouched, his eyes and smile flashing with triumph. Slowly, the president lifted himself out of the rubble. His hair was singed, his glasses were hanging from one ear, his clothing was in disarray. Finally, he said, "All right, eleven to two. But we still have the majority." It's a funny story but one I think is strangely close to the truth sometimes. We're so adamant about being "right" that we leave behind unity of the church for some oftentimes very silly reasons.

Take, for example, something that happened in my very first month of ministry. We had no dedicated space for our youth, so we seized upon a room and set about making it homey for our teens. In order to do that, we needed to get rid of the furniture that was presently in the room. It was a little more 1980's granny than teenager looking. Therein lies the rub, as Shakespeare would say. You see, this particular furniture was given to the church from some very prominent members and they weren't entirely happy about the new plan. So, they threatened to and then eventually did leave the church. But what made it even worse was that they got their family and friends fired up about it as well. The next thing you know, we were about to have a civil war over a couple of pieces of donated furniture. It's just the kind of thing that happens when you're dealing with broken human beings like ourselves. So here was a church, commissioned with sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, suffering with internecine squabbling. All over a couch or two. Well, could it be that our theological differences, the ones that divide us as denominations are no different than those silly couches? Could it be that the division in Christ keeps us from reaching our full potential? Here we are out pulling 4500 lbs. when linking up with others we could pull exponentially more weight.

This particular passage of John's Gospel brings into focus for us the importance of unity. One of the reasons we should be unified is that, as Christians, we are following Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ was completely unified with God the Father and with the Holy Spirit. You hear the closeness between the Father and the Son in this prayer. Called humorously, the Real Lord's Prayer, this particular section of John records a prayer uttered by Jesus Christ in the upper room we all think about in our mind's eye. Throughout the prayer, what we can see is the joy that arises from the closeness of the Son to the Father.

Our relationship with God begins with Jesus' relation to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is to say that our relationship with Jesus flows naturally out of the loving relationship between the Father and the Son in the Godhead. We see the intimacy between the two throughout the Gospels but especially in the Gospel of John. *"Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son that the Son may glorify You, since You have given Him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom You have given Him."* There is a mutuality in this phrasing that points us to the unity between the Father and the Son. Here, Jesus alludes to the fact that the time has come for Him to be sacrificed. In that, God and He will both be glorified. The Christian belief is that the Father and the Son are both fully God but while Godhead, they are distinct persons.

This close relationship was best captured for me imaginatively in the book, "The Shack." There, God the Father and God the Son have a close, loving relationship. What's neat is that the relationship is often depicted as being at table with one another enjoying a delicious meal. All that to say that the book does a good job of capturing the closeness of the relationship, just like this particular passage of John's Gospel does as well. That unity is an example to all believers.

First of all, we should be that close in our walk with Jesus. How are you doing with your relationship with Jesus Christ? If you're having troubles with disunity between yourself and others, this is actually the best place to start. You see, being in a relationship with Jesus Christ assumes a level of humility. For the relationship isn't an equal one. We are the creatures, He our Creator. But He loves us and we know that especially through Jesus Christ.

To be in a relationship with Jesus Christ also means accepting your faults.

Max Lucado said that one day his wife brought home a monkey. His daughters were thrilled but he wasn't; he had all kinds of questions. Where was the monkey going to eat? His wife said that it was going to sit at the table and eat with them, just like the rest of the family. Then he asked her where it was going to sleep? And she told him it was going to sleep in their bed. Then he asked, "But what about the smell?" And she said, "Oh, he'll get used to you, I did." Then Dr. Lucado went on to say, "Before you comment on the odor of someone else, check your own odor first." That's what Jesus meant when He said, "*Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.*" Unity has to begin with us. And it has to begin with our personal relationship with Christ. We have to be one with Christ, first. Our lives have to be knit together with His life through faith. And it has to begin in our Church. As a congregation, our lives have to be knit together in love, through Christ.

How do you knit your life together with God? Well, again, this passage speaks to that, doesn't it? To begin with, knitting your life together with God requires prayer. Jesus frequently prayed to His Father throughout all the Gospels but His prayers are especially magnified here in the Gospel of John. In fact, I think where Jesus' joy came from. In that intimate relationship between the Father and the Son, prayer is the link. Prayer is so vital in the lives of Christians. It is the means by which we talk to and listen to our Great God and it has such an impact on us. Mother Teresa quote: "I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that He will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things."

CS Lewis was the author of the widely read children's books, *The Narnia Chronicles*, as well as many novels for grown-ups and books on issues surrounding the Christian faith. The movie *Shadowlands* (directed by Richard Attenborough and produced in 1993) tells Lewis' story, focusing in particular on his relationship with his wife, Joy Gresham. Gresham and Lewis meet while Lewis is a don at Oxford University. After Joy is diagnosed with cancer the couple married. The movie invites us to witness their love, their pain, their grief, their struggles with faith and God. Eventually Joy dies. At one point in the story a friend says to Lewis, "Christopher can scoff, Jack, but I know how hard you've been praying; and now God is answering your prayers." Lewis replies "That's not why I pray, Harry. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me."

As I said, a relationship with Jesus Christ is one of dependence. That's a word we don't like very much, far favoring independence. Seems more American, doesn't it? But the nature of our relationship with Jesus Christ is one of dependence. In a *Family Circus* comic, little Billy was praying. He prayed, "Make me good. And if you don't get through to me the first time, please keep tryin' 'til I answer." That should be our prayer. As Jesus prayed for our unity we should continue to pray to be reminded. We should pray because we're not called to do it alone. We're called to pull together to serve God through Christ. "Make us one, Lord. And if you don't get through the first time, please keep tryin' 'til we answer and begin to pull together."

But oftentimes, to pull together is going to require something hard to do. In order to break down the walls which divide us, we need something in order to make it work. Forgiveness. I've heard it said that forgiveness is necessary for people who because of their brokenness, can't exactly love quite right. I like that way of looking at things because it pays attention to our shortcomings while at the same time lifting up all our need for forgiveness. Forgiveness is necessary in order to be unified. So, I wonder – do you have any areas of disunity which are causing your life grief? Because the Christian response to the world is very different than the way the world naturally sees things. We turn the other cheek. If asked for our coat, we give our cloak as well. We pray for, get this, even our enemies. Being a Christian is an unnatural way to live in this world broken by sin. And one of the things we can glean from this particular passage is our need to be unified.

The final words of our passage today place the emphasis surely there, on unity between Christians. *And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, which You have given me, that they may be one, even as We are one.*"

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, in a fashionable Richmond church, members of the congregation were invited to come to the altar to receive Holy Communion. After several rows of worshipers came and left after receiving Communion side by side, a black man walked down the aisle. A tense silence gripped everyone. No one else got up to go receive the bread and wine, although many had not yet received Communion. The black man started to kneel alone. Quietly, a tall, graying man with a military bearing stood up and strode down the aisle to the black man's side. Together, they knelt. Before the preacher could continue, people realized that the person kneeling beside the black man without showing any distinction was General Robert E. Lee. Although Lee said nothing, everyone knew he had shown his faith through his act of joining that lonely black worshiper at the altar.

Lee's example is an example for all of us. We have to work toward breaking down the racial, cultural and denominational barriers that divide us as Christians. We're called to let go of past hurts that have separated us from one another by turning them over to God and offering those who have hurt us forgiveness. And in seeking forgiveness from those we have hurt. We're called to demonstrate our unity in Christ through love. It has to start with us. We have to pull together. And we have to keep on climbing. No matter what the vote: Christ's prayer and Christ's command is still that we be one as He is one with God and that we love one another as He has loved us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.