

“Being One Heart and Mind”

John 17: 20-26

Prayer: Loving God, in the words of Jesus, we pray that we may be one in heart and in spirit as we reflect on your word of life. Amen.

If you know that your days are numbered and facing an untimely death, what last words would you tell those very close to you? Will you talk about your best moments? Your last wishes? Your worst nightmare? Your biggest challenges or those that brought joy to your family? I was thinking about the horrendous incident that happened in Uvalde, Texas this past Tuesday—I wonder if those children or those adults who died at the hands of a young gunman, said their last wishes to their family. Probably not. Or those African American folks in Buffalo, NY about 2 weeks ago who were just doing their business of the day but never knew that a white racist man would gun them down? Perhaps they have not said goodbye to their loved ones. Or those young men and women enlisted in Russia and Ukraine who lost their lives due to an unjust war instigated by a dictator? Or the trees that were uprooted from the earth due to the violent windstorm that swept our city last weekend. They haven't said goodbye to the earth where they were born. How could they? Death came to these people and nature unexpectedly, violently, sadly. No words of goodbye.

But for Jesus of the Johannine community, it was different. Jesus knew that his days were numbered. He knew that he would leave his disciples, whom he called his beloved friends, very soon. This particular episode in John comes just before Jesus' arrest and death. Here, Jesus is looking forward, in an almost-wishful kind of way, to the future of his friends and disciples. Jesus offered what he does best. A prayer! “That they may all be one.” Jesus offered a prayer of encouragement, empowering them with a prayer for oneness and loved them with all his heart. Jesus wished for his followers to be one in heart and mind. I wonder if being “one in heart and mind” was a challenge for his disciples? Could Jesus tell that unity would be a problem when he leaves them? It's hard to know for sure, but whatever the reason for it being written in John's gospel, it's clear that we, Christians, followers of Jesus, have not done a very good job of it. Take, for example, this story of how divided we Christians are.

Bob was walking alone one night; out by the bridge that crosses the river on the outskirts of the city. As he came up the bridge, he saw a man standing on it as if he was ready to jump off the railing. Bob was concerned that the man might be trying to take his own life; and thought that if he started talking and found something in common; perhaps the other man would change his mind and decide to live.

“Tell me something,” said Bob, “are you a religious person?” “Yes, I am,” the man replied; “Good, so am I,” said Bob.

“Are you a Christian, a Jewish a Muslim, a Buddhist?” asked Bob; “I’m a Christian,” the man said. “Good,” said Bob, “so am I.”

“Are you a Protestant Christian or a Roman Catholic Christian?” The man answered, “I am a Protestant Christian.” “Good,” said Bob, “so am I.”

“Do you belong to the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian, the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, the Pentecostal Church or the United Church?” “I belong to the United Church,” replied the man on the railing. “Good,” said Bob, “so do I.”

“Are you conservative, liberal, progressive, agnostic or spiritual but not religious United Church member?” The man, now very interested said, “I am a liberal United Church member.” “Good,” said Bob, “so am I.”

“As a liberal United Church member, which creed do you recite – the Apostles Creed, the New Creed or the Song of Faith? “Why, I subscribe to the Song of Faith of course.” Really! said Bob, go and die – you heretic!

Why is being “one heart and mind” crucial in the life of the disciples? Were there some discords that needed patching up? Were there conflicts that needed resolution? Let’s face it – whenever two or three are gathered, there is the possibility not only of harmony and unity but also of discord and disunity. Jesus understands well what it is to be a movement, a group, a family, a community, a church. Although there is no mention of any particular question or issue facing the disciples, one can only assume that the source of tension comes within the group. We’ve

heard of power struggles among them. Peter wanted his way. James and John requested to sit on the right and the left sides of Jesus. Judas had a hidden agenda. This small band of followers were not cut from the same cloth. They were uniquely diverse and different from one another.

Unity or oneness is not the same as uniformity. It is not about having the same opinions, the same gifts to offer, the same outlook on life. Jesus knew pretty well that his disciples were all different in so many ways – in gifts, in personalities, in talents and skills, you name it. But with their common ground in faith, they can work together in building God’s reign on earth. The unity that Jesus prayed for is remarkable. When the disciples are joined together in one heart and mind, they find strength rather than distress. They will be stronger together because they are together in Christ. Jesus’ challenge to being one speaks to us today.

“That all may be one”. Those words might ring a bell for you, or seem familiar. And you have probably seen it whenever you have looked at the crest or the official seal of the United Church of Canada. The Latin words *ut omnes unum sint*, that surround the symbols on the crest, mean "That all may be one." is a reminder that we are both a "united" and "uniting" church. At the 41st General Council (2012), the crest was revised. The four colours of the Aboriginal medicine wheel were used and added the Mohawk phrase which means “all my relations.” This verse suits us for who we are, and who we have been in history going back 97 years, when we have been around. Jesus’ prayer of unity enflamed the hearts of the movers and shakers of the three protestant denominations – The Methodists, The Presbyterians and the Congregationalists - that formed the United Church of Canada in 1925.

I don't know if you have noticed, but our society, our national and global human world, seem to lack something of the ability to be one in heart and mind. How easy it is for us to accuse, to scorn, to scapegoat or to ignore. We would rather fight than agree. We would rather argue than listen. This passage in John has taught us something about why we must stay grounded in our faith, because, in essence, we are the Body of Christ. What we do or do not do - one for another - heals and builds or weakens and diminishes this Body of Christ. What is essential in maintaining the gift of oneness or unity in our churches today is the encouragement of each other, with love as the centre of our faith. This power to unite doesn't come from within us like

our own resolve or determination or intelligence. It is God's dream for us. This dream will not happen because we make it happen; God is bringing it to fulfillment. We participate in the great unfolding of God's plan for the world. That is really good news!

Given our growing appreciation of diversity, how do we see our unity, our oneness here at BCUC? How can we embody Jesus' wish for our community that we all may be one, and yet respect the diversities that thrive within our church? How might these diversities actually lead to one heart and mind?

To be part of a church body that is united means to live with, to be in sync, to work with, to respect and honour what each member offers and appreciate what one can contribute, to bring about some kind of harmony with the other members of the body. If one suffers, the whole body suffers. If one is joyful, the whole body celebrates. This is what we call interdependence. Each part exists to complement and work together for the common good, for the well-being and health of the body. Not to compete, but to complement. We can hold different theological beliefs or political convictions and argue about them, and still be unified in our common vision to serve others in the name of love, justice and compassion.

Let me share a story called the *Parable of the Spilled Coffee* written by the Rev. Kent Crockett:

A Bible study group met in a home to study how various ministries should work in the body of Christ. One member commented, "I don't understand how different gifts can work together." At that moment, a woman accidentally dropped her cup, which broke and spilled coffee all over the floor. Each group member responded differently to the mishap, according to their spiritual gifts.

The teacher gave some advice. "Next time if you put your cup on the coffee table, that won't happen again." The administrator responded by organizing a clean-up committee. "Bill, please go find a mop. Sally, could you help him with a towel?" Bill, who had the gift of service, hurried to get the mop. Sally, who had the gift of helping, followed Bill and said, "I'll get the towel!" The person with the gift of counsel said, "We all make mistakes so don't let it get you down." The person with the gift of care put her arm around the woman, patted her hand and

said, “It’s OK. It’s just coffee. Don’t feel bad about it.” The person with the gift of giving exclaimed, “I’ll buy a new set of coffee mugs to replace the broken one!” They all used their various gifts together to resolve the situation and there was a happy ending. (Kent Crockett, www.kentcrockett.com)

The parable tells us one thing: that we need each other to make things happen for the common good. So, as we close the season of Eastertide and approach the celebration of Pentecost, may you find in the gospel stories that Jesus is not about eliminating differences. Jesus is about unity and love. When we act, speak and think with God’s love, we become one in heart and mind. Amen.