

Unity in Our Diversity

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

May 21, 2023

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

What might Jesus have meant when he prayed: "...so that they may be one, as we are one."? We in the "Church" must always guard against committing the sins of our ancestors, Church (including The United Church of Canada) *enforced* unity, and harming those who express differing opinions, the vulnerable ones that Jesus called us to care for.

I have been in a few wonderful churches, where all seemed well, people welcoming and caring. But then a person in the Community opens up, shares their story of being snubbed in a past church because they have a same gender partner. The person's first testimonial is met with nods and acceptance, but when they share more heartfelt, courageous, stories that celebrate their uniqueness, some normally kind and faithful person reaches the limit of the tolerance.

"Why does that person have to parade their orientation like that?" they share with me in private.

It is a challenge to truly love people whose experience, whose story, whose views are very different from ours. We *want* to love unconditionally, all to be part of God's family, but the practice of loving can be a challenge as we see our comfortable sacred space become populated by diverse people.

I suggest that nothing can rile up faithful congregants more than politics. I think that we can all agree that Jesus would not have subscribed to a particular modern political party. But enter a passionate Christian who wears their political colours a little too loudly. They are not campaigning, exactly, but some people express their faith in ways that have political undertones. Labels then begin to fly – "She's so conservative", or, "He's so liberal." Or, "How can they call themselves a Christian with those views?"

So. I'm wondering today: What is the call to us as Christ's Community in these modern, polarizing times, when Jesus prays that "All may be one, as we are one"?

This is a poignant moment, in today's reading, Jesus sharing a meal with intimate friends, but knowing that his arrest and death is imminent. He segues into a prayer, within their hearing. He turns to his Father, Abba (less formal, like Dad or Daddy), and speaks of his life and ministry, and then prays for those whom God entrusted to him. Not everyone in the world. I have faith that Jesus prayed for them many times and loves them as much. But Jesus' heart is focused on those who are with him, who have followed him – those who will soon have to go out and courageously proclaim in word and action God's Good News of unconditional love for all neighbours. He prays that All May Be One.

Some might harbour the myth that these moments with Jesus were idyllic, everyone of the same mind and heart. Then we need to take off the rose-tinted glasses and read the Gospels again. The disciples were regularly squabbling about seemingly petty things like who gets the seat of honour beside Jesus in heaven. Theologian Helmut Koester

addresses this myth we Church folks harbour about that early Jesus Community who called themselves “The Way”:

We sometimes think that it's just such a shame that we have so many Christian denominations and so many other religions all in one country. "Wouldn't it be great if we have only one belief and one religion as it was in the time of the early Christians?" No (Koester responds), it wasn't in the time of the early Christians. The early Christians had a hard time (talking with one another), (they fought) with one another to establish certain patterns and criteria for the organization of community, what was important in the churches.

There was plenty of conflict in the Jesus Community. Just look at Luke's sequel, the Book of Acts, and you see Apostles having differences of opinion and parting ways.¹ Paul's letters in the Christian Scriptures regularly allude to a squabbling Jesus Community. I picture Paul sometimes like the lecturing father character, Ward Cleaver in the 1950s TV series “Leave it to Beaver”. Remember Ward, taking Beaver into the den and setting Beav straight?

Paul, the dad-symbol for infant Christianity, offers a note of humour to temper the self-righteous churches embroiled in petty debates. Paul suggests we see ourselves as part of a Body – The Body of Christ. When the Body is working well, all parts work together, and they all focus on their roles with enthusiasm. But then one body part becomes jealous because another part is getting all the glory. Of course, Jesus taught humility and service. But then reality sets in – we are human after all.

I love activists, they are passionate for a cause. But too many activists in one room, speaking, not so much listening, can be tedious. My hats off to strong administrators. We have a few people in our Community with that gift. They keep things orderly, they take up the uncomfortable mantle of managing chaos into some semblance of order. But imagine a meeting managed, but without the voice at the table calling the group to respond to a risky cause. It wasn't a budgeted expense, but the issue is relevant and urgent. We need all types in Christ's Community. But, I suggest, the more faithful we become as that Community, the more we will reach outside of our comfort zones, diversifying and, possibly, inviting moments of conflict.

Andrew Prior, a Pastor within the Uniting Church in Australia, offers a helpful perspective, “Unity is not about agreement,” he says. “Too often agreement is about the patron calling the shots. ... Unity where agreement is paramount will forever be at risk of scapegoating. Just get rid of the difficult ones, the odd ones out, and we will have agreement.”²

UT OMNES UNUM SINT “That All May be One”, officially adopted and embedded in our United Church of Canada Crest in 1944 – so many symbols. I think about my 50 some years being part of this church, and I can think of countless squabbles, and downright fights that led to people leaving the church. It's true. Congregations as well as the

¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+15&version=NRSVUE>

² Blog by Andrew Prior found at <https://www.onemansweb.org/my-glory-and-the-lifter-of-my-head-john-17.html>. Special thanks to Jo Anne Taylor whose blog <https://pastorsings.com> (2014/06/01 “Being One based on John 17: 1-11 pointed me to this quote.

national Church, our Denominational Body called the United Church, have muddled at times, while other times, our Church has proven to be most inspiring, as we stay the course that Jesus charted for us – of reaching out, welcoming boldly, and loving unconditionally. Amen.

