

Date: Sunday May 16, 2010

Scripture: John 17:20-26

Title: “That They All May Be One”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus prays the all may be one as he is one with the Father.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): Morrie had it right about loving another and Jesus has it right, too.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

The 1999 movie *Tuesdays with Morrie*, based on the book by the same name, is the true story of a sports writer, Mitch Albom, and his reunion with a former college professor who is dying of ALS. Mitch was a multitasking workaholic, whose life is a series of hurried appointments, rushed phone calls, and last minute sprints to catch a flight. When he discovers his former college professor and friend Morrie Schwartz, was in the last stages of ALS, he honors a long overdue promise to visit him. This first visit becomes one of many visits.

In these visits, Morrie teaches Mitch some important lessons about what matters most in life. Morrie is sometimes patient with Mitch’s shallowness, but in one scene in particular Morrie confronts Mitch with some painful truths. Morrie is very frail, and is lying in a recliner in obvious pain. He grimaces and asks Mitch to rub his aching feet with salve. “When we’re infants,” says Morrie, “we need people to survive; when we’re dying, we need people to survive; but here’s the secret: in between we need each other even more.”

Mitch nods and responds with a quote that he has heard Morrie say many

times. “We must love one another or die.”

Morrie loses patience with Mitch. “Yeah, but do you believe that? Does it apply to you?”

Mitch is stunned and defensive as he confesses that he doesn’t know what he believes. The world he lives in doesn’t allow for the contemplation of spiritual things.

Morrie pushes a little harder. “You hate that word, don’t you—spiritual? You think it’s just touchy-feely stuff, huh?”

“I just don’t understand it,” says Mitch.

“We must love one another or die,” says Morrie. “It’s a very simple lesson, Mitch.”

Martie McMane writes that in the scripture we have heard this morning from John, Jesus is praying to God for the church. And Jesus’ fervent prayer is that we learn to love one another. We talked about that necessity of loving one another right here just two weeks ago. We have those words on our sign; “Love One Another.” And we only put on our sign what is true of who we are. The way Jesus phrases it this morning—three different times in this one prayer—is that we all may be one. What the gospel writer of John is having Jesus express here is a deep desire that the church, the followers of Jesus, be able to experience the same kind of love and unity in the Spirit that Jesus himself experiences with God. “May they be one, just as I am in you and you are in me.” Of course, “That they all may be one” is also the

motto of the United Church of Christ. You will see those words on the UCC logo. I suggest that the same principle hold trues. We should only put on our logo what is true of how we live.

The question becomes, “Why is unity so important in the church?” Why are we as a denomination so concerned about unity and the oneness that Jesus raises three times in this powerful prayer? There are many reasons but I will mention two this morning.

The first is because how we act says something to others about God. As Christians in a pluralistic world, we do not have to believe that Jesus is the only way to God. But as Christians we do believe that we have something particular to bring to the dialogue about God. We understand a bit of God because of our relationship with Christ. The Christian story says that in Jesus Christ we see the nature of God revealed in a particular way. By knowing Jesus, we say, we come to know more about God. We learn from Jesus that God’s nature is one of love and forgiveness. We learn from Jesus that the Holy Spirit is God’s life giving energy given to those who believe so that they may experience God’s guidance and wisdom not only for their own healing and wholeness, but also for the healing and wholeness of the world. So, if those things are true, and we are to be followers of the Christ guided by the Holy Spirit and yet we do not live in unity but are fighting among ourselves and judging others, then it would seem that the very message we say we believe is nullified. In other words, take the words off the sign and leave the logo blank.

The second reason that unity is important is that we need each other. We need the comfort, instruction, and gifts that others possess. We deprive ourselves of great joy when we divide. But we need to remember that unity is not uniformity. Jesus did not pray, “That they all may be the same.” He prayed, “That they all may be one.” Variety is valuable, and in the words of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, former pastor of the largest UCC Church, Trinity UCC on the South Side of Chicago, “different is not deficient.” It is just different.

Yet it is, of course, precisely because we are different that our unity is sometimes a struggle. It is important to remember that our differences serve a very important function: They keep us from grievous error. When everyone marches in lock step all the time it is easy to be led astray without even realizing it. Adolf Hitler led a whole nation astray. He did it by silencing all competing viewpoints.

Differences keep us fresh and alive. Differences force us to think about what we believe. They keep us growing. When we’re in a place where everyone thinks exactly alike we can stop thinking. And that is dangerous.

Differences keep us mentally awake and alert. That’s good for us. Think of all the joy we would be missing if we were all the same! I need what you know about God to keep my knowledge of God expanding. We need each other’s viewpoints because none of us knows everything – I know, that’s hard for some of us to swallow, but none of us knows everything. As someone put it, “All of us together is smarter than any one of us.” What’s really exciting is to pose this question: “What part of God do you know about that the world needs?”

In our UCC, I think we have a particularly wonderful challenge. I see us being called by God to be an inviting, open minded, and pluralistic Christian church. One in which people of many different interpretations of scripture, different backgrounds, different sexual orientations, different tastes, different political views can come together in community; and not just any community, but a community of faith. What a magnificent opportunity! And right here on this corner of 4th and Vermont, God is giving us a chance to trust the Holy Spirit to bring unity into a body of very diverse people in one Christian community.

That was Jesus' prayer, "That they all may be one." That people would come to know the extraordinary love and unity that Jesus himself experienced with God. This prayer of his indicates that when such unity occurs, it is a gift of the Spirit. For notice that John has Jesus pray this prayer to God as if we are standing by listening. He does not have Jesus give last minute instructions to the church. He has Jesus pray for the church. It is John's way of telling us, "Remember, you cannot do this apart from Christ and the Holy Spirit." We cannot make such unity happen all on our own. This is a paradox in our faith. It is not all up to us, but we do play our part. One has to desire unity to achieve unity. Perhaps it is like that old saying, "We are to work as if everything depended on us and pray as if everything depended on God."

In his book *One Church from the Fence*, Wes Seelinger writes:

I have spent long hours in the intensive care waiting room...watching with anguished people...listening to urgent questions: 'Will my husband make it? Will my child walk again? How do you live without your companion of thirty years?' The

intensive care waiting room is different from any other place in the world. And the people who wait are different. They can't do enough for each other. No one is rude. The distinctions of race and class melt away. A person is a father first, a black man second. The garbage man loves his wife as much as the university professor loves his, and everyone understands this. Each person pulls for everyone else. In the intensive care waiting room the world changes. Vanity and pretense vanish. The universe is focused on the doctor's next report. If only it will show improvement. Everyone knows that loving someone else is what life is all about (McMane).

Today's good news is that Morrie had it right all along about the need to love to one another. Thank goodness Mitch heard the words and did something about it. More importantly, Jesus has it right all along about loving one another and being one in his name. Now it is up to us to hear those words and for us to do something about them. Let it be so, let it be love, and let us pray.

Lord,

We hear the words, love one another. And we try. In the midst of the differences and diversity you have created, we focus on being one in your name. This is your call to your church and it is the call we are answering. This we pray. Amen.

Offering:

Through our offering we can pool our resources and proclaim our faith and love. Let us make our offering faithfully and with love. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication:

Lord, accept and bless this that we give with faith and love. We hope that these gifts will strengthen us as ambassadors of your love. So we pray to you, Amen.

Benediction:

Go forth as one in the name of Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All the world will know we are Christians by our love. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

McMane, Martie; First Congregational Church – Boulder, CO; Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2010.