

“Uniting the Church of Christ”
John 17:20-26

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June 2, 2019

I've been having an interesting few weeks as a pastor. Because I'm a local church pastor, most weeks I'm grounded in my work at Edgewood – 95% of the people I talk to are Edgewood members or friends, 95% of the meetings I attend are at Edgewood and about our ministries, 95% of the praying and preaching I do is with and for our own church. But occasionally I end up in meetings with people from other congregations, or talking to people from other faith communities, and even leading worship in other churches. These last few weeks that has happened not 5% of my time, but at least 45% of my time. It's put on my mind all the similarities and differences we have with our neighboring faith communities, and which part of those aspects are important and which parts we make more important than they really are.

In particular, I've been working with a group of leaders from five churches, including Edgewood, to create a joint interfaith booth for the Michigan Pride Festival. For the past several years, there have been more and more churches becoming welcoming and wanting to show that welcome by participating in Pride. And that's great – I wish every church would welcome LGBT folks and I wish every church would take that welcome seriously enough to celebrate at Pride.

But the side effect of this new found interest is that there is a point in the Pride festival where you are walking down a gauntlet of churches all trying to convince you to join them because they are the most welcoming. It can make you feel like you have an extra ticket to Hamilton and all of a sudden everyone you know is saying, “Pick me! Pick me! Pick me!” and it's more stressful than fun. Add to the fact that for so long many churches have been and still are harmful to LGBT folks – sometimes I wonder if some of those churches are there to feel good

about themselves instead of representing their ongoing authentic LGBT ministry.

So this year, after an interfaith clergy meeting where we named the tensions of all the churches trying to compete for attention at Pride, a group of us decided to try a different way and work together. All Saints Episcopal Church, Asbury United Methodist Church, UU Church of Greater Lansing, the Unity Church of Lansing, and us, Edgewood United Church, United Church of Christ. We are sharing resources and collaborating on ideas. Because we have a joint booth, we only need 4 volunteers from each of our faith traditions instead of needing a dozen, so it's a good stewardship of our people resources as well. That part is especially nice because those of us who have been going for over twenty years are committed but a little tired, and those churches that are brand new are energized but small. There is a spirit in this group that is revitalizing and creative.

The key to this collaboration is that we are celebrating our differences – recognizing and respecting that because each of our traditions is unique from one another different people will be attracted to different places, but lifting up our unity – acknowledging that our shared commitment to the LGBT community is most important for this occasion rather than marking our territory. At our last planning meeting someone said, "This feels exactly like what we are supposed to be doing together as churches – working with each other, supporting each other, and finding common ground. And yet, it feels like a novelty to be around a table together in a meaningful way."

This is the kind of ongoing, expansive welcome Jesus was praying about in today's scripture passage from Luke. The prayer we read is the last one Jesus gave before he was crucified, and it is a prayer for the future of his disciples, that they may welcome in new believers and followers, and that they may be united in their discipleship, each of them knowing

Jesus in their own right instead of creating a hierarchy of believers who were originally there versus who joined later on. The heart of his prayer is “that they may all be one.”

Today this phrase, “That they may all be one,” is the motto of the United Church of Christ, our church’s denomination. Rather than forming because of a split in a church, the United Church of Christ was formed when different churches came together, finding enough in common with each other that they could sit at the same table, join together over their shared faith, and faithfully wrestle together in the areas where we diverged. Sometimes it feels like we are so different from one another across UCC congregations that the only thing we have in common is we are willing to sit at the same table together. But in all honesty, we shouldn’t take that lightly. There are too many other churches that are unwilling to sit at the table at all, so when we find folks who are longing to break bread despite our differences, or maybe because of them, it should be a joyful feast.

The hope of and longing for unity does not mean there is not room for disagreement or discord. Unity does not mean uniformity. Unity means that we acknowledge there are differences and are able to see beyond them to something bigger than us that is worth coming together for – in the case of the interfaith group at pride, we acknowledge that the LGBT community’s needs are bigger than our own as individual churches, and in the case of the many diverse congregations in the United Church of Christ, we acknowledge that God’s love encompasses us all equally. That shared knowledge allows us to build trust and relationship with one another so that we *can* have hard conversations and wrestle with individual issues that could potentially divide us. Through the challenges, we continue to pray that we may all be one.

This is a prayer that is powerful in interfaith settings and in our denomination, but it also speaks to us as a congregation. Jesus calls for unity in the church whether you have been here

since the beginning or you are just arriving. It's a call for unity that understands that no one person has a claim on God or how things are done or what the most important thing about being church is.

It takes everyone, willing to sit down at the table together, celebrating the things we have in common, and allowing our differences to challenge us into growth and adaptive change. It reminds me of poet Gwendolyn Brooks who wrote, "We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond."

Too often in our world calls for unity are used to silence and control conversation instead of inviting us to have the hard conversations. In Virginia Beach this week 12 people were murdered in an act of gun violence. It has passed with barely a mention because we have become so inundated and desensitized to mass violence, and because we know how the narrative will unfold. Some of us will call out for stronger gun control and others will say, "Now isn't the time. Let's be united in our grief and keep the politics for later." And then there is silence. It feels like now we skip the calls for legislative change and having internalized the calls for false unity, remain silent.

What if instead of calls for unity that equate silence, we called for a unity where we could begin the conversation by agreeing that all of us want an end to mass violence by guns or any other means. What if we could say that statement in mixed company without jumping to the conclusion of how we will achieve that? At what point did saying, "I'm tired of people dying" become a divisive statement instead of a uniting one?

"That they may all be one" is a call for us to find those points of similarities and start there. Whether it is a shared belief in God and followers of Jesus or a shared belief in wanting our country to be a place of safety for all folks, find the place we are united, and begin there.

Celebrate that place of connection. Build relationships and trust with one another. Remind yourselves that just because you've been at this longer than the next person doesn't mean you have all the answers and doesn't mean you deserve to have more power or access or voice.

Next week in worship we will celebrate Pentecost, the birthday of the early Christian church, the first moment when Christians began living into Jesus' hope and prayer that they may all be one. May we carry his prayer into Pentecost Sunday and beyond, making more room at the table and seeking out those friends and neighbors who wish to be joined with us, understanding that differences are inevitable but we can do so much more when we are united as one.