

Clackamas United Church of Christ
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The Unity of All Things: How to Be One with Jesus, God, and All Humanity

I knew that whoever had to read the Gospel lesson today was in a bit of trouble. It's a complicated, circular, and repetitive passage. When I read it to myself, I have to pay close attention to it or else I tune out. And so I felt bad for whoever was stuck reading this passage. And when I looked who volunteered for this day and saw it was Sharon, I thought, "Oh Sharon, I'm so sorry."

(Sharon did great, by the way! 😊)

This passage comes from the Gospel of John. And in John's Gospel, Jesus tends to be very circular in his teachings.

If you are like me, you often think of circular arguments in a negative light. In fact, I looked up circular reasoning on Wikipedia. And it tells me that circular reasoning is a fallacy. But Jesus, apparently, didn't care what Wikipedia was going to say 2000 years later, so he went ahead and did it.

Jesus starts in one place, the place of oneness. He prays that we all might be one. As Jesus is one with God he prays that we might be one with each other and that we might find ourselves within the life of God. Jesus then moves in the circle over to glory. God gave Jesus glory and Jesus shares that glory with us so that we might be one within the glory of God. And then Jesus moves over here to love, and wants us to know that we are united with God's love because God loves us in the same way that God loves Jesus. And then Jesus closes the circle by praying that the love of God for him that existed before the world began would unite us all because God's love for all of us is eternal.

Jesus' prayer is intentionally circular because he wants to make sure that we get it. God is not out to get us by punishing us or condemning us. God is out to love us. All of us. This unity that Jesus prays for is a unity that's based on sharing God's glory with one another by sharing the eternal love of God with one another. It is in loving one another where we find the glory of God and unity with each other.

I think that despite this passage being difficult to read, Jesus' prayer for oneness is crucially important. It is important for us in the United Church of Christ. When our denomination was born, our first motto came from this prayer for oneness. The United Church of Christ was formed from four different denominations that united to become one. And our first motto was, "May they be one."

But this passage is also important for humanity because in his circular reasoning, Jesus hits all of the things that make for true unity - a shared sense of glory and love.

Jesus gives us a true sense of unity, but throughout most of human history, we have found a false sense of unity. This false sense of unity is pretty easy to explain. You already know it well. The easiest way to find a sense of unity and oneness is to unite against a common enemy.

People have done this from the beginning of our history. Our ancient ancestors had conflicts over a shared desire for an object - whether a watering hole, food to eat, social status or a love interest. Anthropological evidence shows that many ancient groups destroyed themselves with violence. But over time, some groups were able to unite their inner conflicts against a single victim, who was blamed for all the problems within the community and who was then sacrificed.

Some anthropologists claim that this way of finding unity against a common enemy was there in the beginning of human history and it remains with us today. In fact, it seems that this way of finding unity against a common enemy is embedded in our social DNA. It is our default mechanism for finding unity.

It leads us to hate. Hate against an evil other is a glue that often holds us together.

This false sense of unity bonded by hate remains all around us today in our fractured world. Tragically, it infects almost every aspect of our culture - from religion to politics to neighborhood functions to supermarket gossip magazines - we are tempted to find a sense of oneness by uniting against an enemy.

That's why Jesus' circular reasoning is so important to understand. Jesus brings us a different way of finding unity in the world.

It's based on love. It's based on sharing glory.

But who wants to share glory? I mean really. I can be a pretty selfish person. When I have glory, it's not my natural inclination to share it with others. I want to keep it for myself! And if someone else has glory, I'm just resentful that they have it and I don't!

But Jesus was full of God's glory. And God's glory is not something that you can keep for yourself. God's glory spreads. It's meant to be shared. And we tend to think of God's glory as power. But God's glory is not the power of being against someone else. God's glory is the power to love everyone else.

For Jesus, the glory of God is not the glory to unite against a common enemy. It is the glory to love that lifts us up into the divine life of God - that we might love all people and in doing so, that we might be one with God and with all of humanity.

I'd like to end with a story about the love, glory, and oneness of humanity and of God.

Balpreet Kaur is a faithful woman of the Sikh religion. She was once at an airport waiting in line when a young man took her picture and posted it on his social media with the caption, "I'm not sure what to conclude from this."

The image was shared thousands of times with people making fun of Balpreet. Why were people making fun of her? Because Balpreet has facial hair.

A friend told Balpreet about the post and she saw all the horrible, demeaning comments. She decided to make a comment of her own. She introduced herself and wrote about the divine life that unites us all. She also explained,

"Yes, I'm a baptized Sikh woman with facial hair. Yes, I realize that my gender is often confused and I look different than most women. However, baptized Sikhs believe in the sacredness of the body - it is a gift that has been given to us by the Divine Being...So, to me, my face isn't important but the smile and the happiness that lie behind the face are...I hope this explains everything a bit more, and I apologize for causing such confusion and uttering anything that hurt anyone."

Balpreet opens my eyes to the oneness that Jesus talked about. The man who posted her image united against her in mockery. If I were Balpreet, I may have responded in kind - try to seek a little revenge by calling the guy a jerk, if not something worse. But that would not have been an act of love or justice. It would have been an act of revenge. Balpreet didn't do that. Instead, she sought justice for herself through a nonviolent act of love. She politely explained her life and pointed us to the sacred unity that we all share.

And guess what! The man who originally posted her image responded to her. Balpreet's response softened his heart. He wrote,

"I know that this post ISN'T a funny post but I felt the need to apologize to the Sikhs, Balpreet, and anyone else I offended when I posted that picture. Simply put it was stupid. Making fun of people is funny to some but incredibly degrading to the people you're making fun of. It was an incredibly rude, judgmental, and ignorant thing to post."

Balpreet, a person of the Sikh religion, was living out the prayer of Jesus. She found true unity, true love, true justice as she communicated with nonviolent action. She knew she was one with all people, even one with the person who tried to humiliate her. And so she didn't humiliate him in return. Instead, she did something different. She shared the glory and love of God, and in doing so, the man repented from his demeaning actions and they found a sense of oneness in their glorious, God-given and shared humanity.

Okay, one last story. We have received around 1,000 messages from people through email and social media during the last week. The vast majority has been thanking us for our open and

affirming stance towards our LGBTQ siblings. We have received many messages from transgender folks who have expressed the deep pain of being banished from their families and their churches.

Remarkably, none of them have expressed any desire for revenge. None of them have expressed any hatred of their families or their churches. I can tell you, some other people hope that I burn in hell for all of eternity, but I can tell you that none of the LGBTQ folks interacting with us hope for that kind of future for the people who have hurt them. All our LGBTQ siblings want is what we all want, to be part of a community where they can be loved and where they can share that love with others.

Jesus prays for us to be one. To love one another as God has loved us. This is the hope for our fractured world. It is the way to a more just and loving world. We find this oneness in all places, in all religions, in all genders, in all races, in all sexualities, in all peoples. And wherever we find it, let us say, Glory to God. Hallelujah.

Amen