



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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**“They’ll Know We Are Christians Our...”**

John 17:20-26

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Today we focus on Christian unity. To some the very idea of Christian unity sounds oxymoronic. And no wonder. Those of us on Christianity’s progressive side can find Bible believing fundamentalists embarrassing and irritating. We see our United Methodist friends in turmoil. Some say Christian unity is an oxymoron. But not Jesus. He prays that “all may be one” (John 17:21).

In our reading, Jesus is in Jerusalem, in the Upper Room with his disciples. After dinner he prays a long prayer. He prays for himself and for his disciples. In our reading he prays for you and me; for all who make up the global church, all who are here, in this day and age, because of the witness of disciples who have come before us. Jesus prays with hope and vision for Christians everywhere, that “they may all be one.”

Through the years, Jesus’ prayer has been the theological touchstone for the Ecumenical Movement. Ecumenism works to develop closer relationships among all the diverse groups under the Christian umbrella. We do this out of the conviction that Christian disunity is a scandal, that our disunity grieves God. Because of Jesus’ prayer, we work for unity in the hope that all followers might experience something of the relationship he has with his heavenly Father.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christians of all kinds have given time and energy to work toward better understandings of one another. Roman Catholics, and people from non-denominational churches, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals and Presbyterians; we’ve all tried to talk with one another, to forge meaningful connections, to build bridges.

It’s been slow, important, hard work. We see the fruit of this work globally in The World Council of Churches and Vatican II. We see it locally in wedding ceremonies and baptisms when a Roman Catholic priest and Protestant pastor stand side by side, or when a professor from Trinity Lutheran Seminary serves communion here at Broad Street.

This week I spoke with Rev. Rebecca Tollefson, former Executive Director of the Ohio Council of Churches, now honorably retired. She served that ecumenical organization for 21 years. I asked her what it was like to lead such a diverse Christian group. In response, she laughed. She remembers more than one time, when in frustration, she wanted “To bop a Bishop on the head!”

It’s been said that “Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and what arrived was the church.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus prays that “they may all be one” and what we get is the complexity of Christianity today; a jumble of denominational names and different understandings - about the Bible, the Lord’s Supper, Baptism, and a host of social justice issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Roman Catholic priest and theologian Alfred Loisy; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_Loisy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Loisy)

Back to the United Methodists. They made headlines after their General Conference in February. Delegates from around the world voted to penalize congregations that include the LGBTQ community in leadership in the church. Faithful North American United Methodists are asking how to work toward unity, given their deep theological differences. Some wonder whether how to remain as one in a body that has chosen to elevate tradition over social justice.

After the Last Supper, after Jesus' washes his disciples' feet and they share a meal together, one of their own fractures their unity. After dinner, Judas leaves the Upper Room. He walks out into the night, to betray his friend. Jesus' arrest and death soon follow. Even among the twelve disciples, the precursor of the church, there was dissension. Oneness is a prayer, an aspiration; but so often not a lived reality. Because we are human, with flaws and hurts, because we live in a broken world.

In the 1960s, many mourned the brokenness in our country. In those turbulent times a Roman Catholic priest on Chicago's south side, Peter Scholtes, wrote a song for the young people in the church choir: "They'll know we are Christians by our Love."<sup>2</sup> We know it as "We are one in the Spirit." He took his inspiration from a phrase in John's gospel, from chapter 13, verse 35. Back in the early church, people outside the faith community used to describe Christians with these words: "Behold, how they love one another."

These days, sadly, many outside of Christianity know we are Christians not by our love but by our... divisions. Our divisions are deep and wide, and they impact the world. These days, Christianity gets stereotyped as non-inclusive and even at times, supportive of white nationalism. Ironically, it can be easier for us to engage in interfaith dialogue with those outside of Christianity – with progressive Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs - than to be in relationship with fundamentalist Christians.

For example, take Eboo Patel. He is a scholar and Muslim social activist. Last year he wrote a book called *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise*. Patel was born in Mumbai and grew up in Chicago. He graduated from the University of Illinois and Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He tells of a visit to his grandmother in India. He saw her offer shelter and support to poor women fleeing domestic abuse. She told him, "I do it because I am Muslim. This is what Muslims do." Patel remembers the moment as a turning point. He credits his grandmother with giving him a lifelong vision of what mercy means. He recalls:

I realized this is not just a religion of secret prayers apart from the rest of your life. It ought to be the inspiration for profound engagement with the rest of the world."<sup>3</sup>

Patel's interfaith perspective sheds light on our ecumenical struggles. Our job as Christians is to follow Jesus' merciful, open-hearted lead. The world needs people willing to put faith in action; to reach and do. We can't be silent in terms of how we view vulnerable populations. Jesus calls us to show we are Christians, not by our divisions, but by our love. This is what Christians do. The hard part is that following Jesus means we don't get to pick and choose who we love and who we don't love. Jesus loves the fundamentalist as well as the Humanist, as well as the Roman Catholic and Muslim and Jew and atheist and Presbyterian. Jesus loves all.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Scholtes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Scholtes)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/77513-out-of-many-faiths-ebboo-patel-sees-a-potluck-not-a-melting-pot-nation.html>

Yesterday I took an early morning walk. It was damp, cool and foggy. As poet Carl Sandburg once wrote, “the fog comes on little cat feet.”<sup>4</sup> Fog obscured my view. I couldn’t see to the end of the block. Being church together in the world can feel like walking in the fog. We can’t see where we’re headed.

Jesus prays to God, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:22). Even though we walk as if in a fog, we are companioned by glory, by God’s unity, which is so much bigger than any of our religious structures, a unity that stretches from the beginning to the end of time, around the globe, throughout the universe. God isn’t bound by our barriers. Nothing will keep God from this work of love.

Our job here on earth is to cultivate a theology of profound human worthiness. An understanding of one another not rooted in gender or race or sexuality or economic class or even religion. An understanding that transcends any single part of our being and taps into our inherent worth as children of God. We are called to teach our children and remind one another that people are people, period.<sup>5</sup> We are called to practice that, model that, live that. God can use that kind of love to bring healing to the world.

Today we overhear Jesus praying on our behalf. We overhear him entrust the future of the faith community to God. Thank goodness! As we hear Jesus trust God, we are invited to trust God, too, with our lives and with the church. Jesus’ prayer for Christian unity is an ongoing effort, a mindset, an attitude; a project that is always in process. Jesus longs for Christian unity. He prays for Christian unity, “that they may all be one.” May it be so, Lord, may it be so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45032/fog-56d2245d7b36c>

<sup>5</sup> Erin Wathen, *Resist and Persist: Faith and the Fight for Equality*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2018) p. 127.