



### **“One in the Spirit”**

June 2, 2019

John 17: 20-26

Rev. Jennifer Knutsen

Unity is a familiar concept for most Americans. It’s actually part of our national motto. I don’t know if you know these words: “E pluribus unum.” (You see them on our coins.) It’s Latin — it means — “Out of many, one.” Or it could be translated — “One from many.”

In 1776 this motto was suggested to the committee developing the Great Seal of the United States. It has thirteen letters — representing the thirteen colonies uniting to form a new nation. “Out of many, one” fit our new national identity. The motto was adopted in 1782 and stuck until 1956 when Congress adopted a new official motto — “In God We Trust.”

I wonder given our current national sentiments, deep political and social divisions, and general skepticism about God if Congress would be so bold as to adopt either of these mottos today. But, so far neither of them has been reversed.

I used to have a job working at the National Cathedral in Washington DC. I was a teacher for a hands-on educational program for elementary school children. They came to the Cathedral for field trips from area schools to learn about the art, architecture and American history represented in the Cathedral.

As part of our tour we would stand just inside the huge bronze doors at the West Entrance of the Cathedral and look at the floor. Inlaid in that floor are the Seals of each of the 50 states. And right in the middle is the Great Seal of the United States — and those words — E pluribus unum.

When I would ask the children to explain what that could possibly mean about our country, they had no problem connecting that ideal to their own experiences growing up in the area of the nation’s capital. We are a diverse people — lots of ages, backgrounds, races, languages, countries of origin — and we are all here in this one nation.

Unity is very much a part of our identity as a church, too. RUC, Rockville United Church is a united church — literally a blending of two church traditions from two denominations. Presbyterian USA, and United Church of Christ.

The United Church of Christ emphasizes this idea of unity at its core. We say we are called to be “a united and uniting church.” The UCC has some mottos, too. One of them is “That they

may all be one” — a phrase taken directly from the passage in the gospel of John that we read today. Another motto for the UCC is, “In essentials-unity, in nonessentials-diversity, in all things-charity.” That means the UCC has no rigid doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures. The overarching creed is love. And that is lived out emphasizing unity in the midst of diversity.

The history of the Presbyterian denominations in the United States has had many divisions and unifications over the years since the 18th century. Our own denomination, The Presbyterian Church (USA), is the result of the reunion of two branches — when the so-called northern and southern branches came together 1983.

As I thought about this idea of unity as we typically experience it in both our national and church identities, I realized the concept seems directional— flowing from diversity toward unity. We think of ourselves as divided, different, unique. Our work is to figure out how to come together.

Our culture celebrates individuality. We identify in our particularity. We like the idea of the hero. We protect individual rights and privileges over those of the community. When we do group ourselves, we often do so drawing lines of differentiation. We create political parties, coalitions, clubs, and caucuses. Yes, even churches can feel more like a collection of individuals than a community of kindred spirits. E pluribus unum. Out of many, one.

But what if we reverse this understanding. What if we consider that our work is not so much to flow from our diversity toward our unity, but to remember that we begin in unity, in the oneness of the heart of God, and everything that we are and everything that we do flows out from our oneness, from our unity.

Remember how the Gospel of John starts: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Everything flows from God — the Word, Logos, Wisdom, Spirit.

When Jesus says “that they may all be one”, he is praying to God. This is Jesus’ final prayer to God before he dies. In John’s gospel, different from the other gospels, it is not set in the Garden of Gethsemane, but at the Last Supper. Jesus is gathered with his disciples, washing their feet, breaking bread with his friends and trying to say good bye.

Then Jesus prays to God, it is not a prayer in agony; it is not a prayer of feeling forsaken or lost. It is a prayer grounded in love — the love of God for all.

Jesus prays speaking intimately to God like he’s talking to his papa and also expressing the feeling of being intimately connected to God like he’s being held in the arms of his mama:

“As you, Abba, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

God is one. And we, being grounded in God are one. Our unity is born out of the oneness of God. Our unity is not a thing to be achieved. It is actually a gift bestowed on us as beings created in the image of God. Our unity is our fundamental way of being.

There is a theological word that gets at this. It is ontological. It has to do with who we are — our very essence of being. The theologian Paul Tillich is famous for characterizing God in ontological terms. He calls God the “Ground of All Being.” That fits. All being — including human beings— flows from the Ground of All Being.

We tend to think of ourselves first as individuals and ourselves in community flowing from that, but not all cultures view the world this way. Craig B. Anderson, who served at one time as the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of South Dakota has written about the understanding of community he experienced living and working among the Native American churches he served there.

“The Episcopal Church in South Dakota is unique in that the majority of churches and parishioners in the bi-cultural diocese are Lakota/Dakota/Nakota members of The Great Sioux Nation. Lakota understandings of human being and community have a different starting point and as such serve as a corrective to the persistent and pervasive rugged individualism and parochialism of our culture. Within Lakota culture communal identity is prior to and shapes individual identity born of a recognition that prior to me, there is a thee and Thou. The nation, the tribe, the band or community bestow identity.... This notion is manifest in the word “Lakota” itself which translates as “allies,” “friends,” “the people.”

A Lakota person’s identity is primarily relational, not individual... The *tiyospaye*, (tee-yo-schpa-yeah), the extended family or community is the primary source of meaning....” The church, understood as “*Tiyospaye Wakan* translates as “Holy Family” — an extended holy family with the obligation to adopt the stranger and where all persons have a place in the sacred circle. No one is left out.”

Jesus prays to God out of his own experience as part of the sacred circle. The prayer moves out beyond himself. He prays — help us to see that we are all one.

It is a prayer for Jesus himself. “God, help me to believe that I am one with you.”

It is a prayer for Jesus’ disciples. “God, help them to believe that after I am gone, are still one with you.”

It is a prayer for all future generations —all of us. “God, help us to believe that we are one with you.”

When we pray with our children in Sunday School, we often take a bowl and pour in some water. Then each child is invited to take a stone and drop it in the water as they offer their joys or concerns. As the stone goes into the water, it makes a ripple.

I like to think of prayer as a way of creating a ripple. When Jesus prayed, “that they may all be one,” he was creating that kind of ripple. He prayed in gratitude and hope of the connection that binds all together. “We are One in the Spirit.” Amen.