

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
June 3, 2012
John Crosby
Fruit of the Spirit: Unity in Love
John 17**

(Video shown.)

I have a friend who says, "There is nothing like the local church when the local church works right." Jesus said it a different way in John 17. Speaking to His Father in heaven He said,

¹³ "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.

²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Unity! Community! We wanted to talk about that today because so often in our week to week, we are talking about "Which service are you going to?" "Which community do you belong to?" and we wanted to reinforce what Jesus is talking about because unity is so precious and frankly, fragile, that it is easy to miss. I did this a while back, but I want to just review how different churches can not only break unity but show God in different ways.

There are billboards outside a couple of different churches, the first belongs to a Catholic Church, and says, "All dogs go to heaven." Okay, to which Protestant Presbyterians respond, "Only humans go to heaven. Read the Bible." Not to be outdone, the Catholics respond, "God loves all His creatures, dogs included." The debate goes on, "Dogs don't have souls. This is not open for debate." Not to be stopped, the Catholics say, "Catholic dogs go to heaven. Presbyterian dogs can talk to their pastor." The Presbyterians immediately respond, "Converting to Catholicism does not magically grant your dog a soul." The Catholics, not to be stopped said, "Free dogs' souls first." I've got to go with the Catholics at this point. The Presbyterians come back, "Dogs are animals. There aren't any rocks in heaven either", and the Catholics finish the argument, "All rocks go to heaven."

We laugh at that because it reveals how petty our differences are, right? How silly we look to people who are having a hard time believing in God at all, much less an invisible God who is one God but still somehow Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together, much less Methodist and

Episcopal and Catholic and Baptist and Independent and even Presbyterian. Where is the unity in that? That is a sermon for another day.

I want to show you unity that is supposed to happen in the congregation. Every year for over 20 years, Laura and I have had the privilege of driving to my in-laws', her parents', cabin in the middle of Wisconsin, and every time we go past two churches that are side by side. They are so fascinating that often we would stop and take a picture. One time we were headed some place and stopped in on a Sunday morning. The church on the left (*slide shown*) was having worship and I said to them, "I've got to know. Tell me the story." They said, "Well, just yesterday," about 78 years ago, "just yesterday a group of people got so upset with what was happening that they walked out the back door. They walked next door and built another church, and half went to one church and half went to the other church. The problem is that now all the young folks have moved away from this part of Wisconsin, and there are barely enough to fit in one church."

I said, "What do you do?" They said, "Well, on one Sunday we worship in this building, and the next Sunday we worship in that building." For some of us, it is hard to give up. How did we get from the video we saw to these two churches so quickly? What breaks the unity of the Body of Christ in the individual church? I think, for me, most usually it begins with the pride or the sinfulness of the leaders of the church. They are not willing. "This is about God. You can't compromise." No, but can you grow? No, your pride won't let that happen. Or, one leader gathers up personality following and when that leader stumbles sexually or monetarily or doctrinally, people follow right over the cliff, and we divide.

I think we divide for significant theological disagreements. They always sound silly in the history books, but they are vibrant at the time. The apostle Paul says, "Now we see through a glass darkly" and because of the darkness, because of the dusk, we see things differently, and they are very important to us. Sometimes not only can we not agree, we can't find a way to disagree, and when we can't even disagree, we split.

Then the third reason I think disunity often comes to a church is because of the tension between tradition and innovation. We joke about this. This is one of the things that makes this church united and healthy, so we can joke and say, "The organ is not from the devil." For those of you who don't know it, that big thing over there is the organ. "Nor are drums from the devil." We hide those at night to pretend that they are not part of the church. We balance innovation and tradition so that we can do the ministry that is common to us all because disunity leaves many people feeling outside, like they don't fit in or like they don't fit in any more. This church has been blest incredibly for over 50 years with the spirit of unity that embraces people who are different and invites people who are different. I thank God for the gift of our unity because disunity leaves people feeling on the outside of the love of Jesus Christ, and that is not heresy. That is evil from the pit of hell.

Our church has been blest, I believe, by a healthy legacy, a sense of motion because we are always doing something new, and that motion inhibits the divisions that come when you are stagnant. It is, I think, a gift from God that we have been able in whatever language to keep the main thing the main thing, and when the past isn't forgotten, the lay people have reminded us what our main thing is. I've got to tell you, I think that for 50-plus years, our unity has been a gift of the grace of God. Many other churches, just as Godly, just as smart, just as whatever, have

been split asunder, and we have not and so when things start to go bad, we need to ask ourselves, how do we fix it? But more importantly for me, *before* things get bad, while things are *good*, is the time for us to ask, what creates and preserves and strengthens the unity that Jesus talked about?

Well, I think this church is united best when we remember that it is not the pastor's church. It is not my church. And we are united more often when we remember it ain't your church either. This is the church where the Savior has come and has decided to spend time for awhile with anybody who would come in and to walk away with anybody who will walk out. So how does the Savior create, strengthen, and preserve unity? Well, I think it becomes a little clearer when we see that unity comes from the grace of Christ, the grace that draws us together and reminds us that we are all beloved children of God. That kid in the ghetto who has just thrown a rock through your window is a beloved child of God, and every beloved child of God is also broken. That elder in our church who looks like she hasn't sinned in 20 years is a deeply broken person. The grace of Jesus reminds us that we are beloved and broken at the same time. Grace, by the way, means a place I am supposed to meet everybody here. It is not in the board or elder meeting room. The place I am supposed to meet everybody with whom I disagree is at the foot of the Cross because it reminds both of us who we are and whose we are.

And one more thing about grace. Churches that have grace at the center realize that churches fight. There is not one Letter that the apostle Paul or the other writers of the Bible wrote to the church in the New Testament times that did not talk about arguments, disagreements, disunity, fighting, potential chaos. We need to normalize that conflict is imperative for unity. Let me say that again. We need to normalize that conflict is imperative for unity because with 5,000 members, we are not all thinking the same thing at the same time, and the grace that Jesus Christ uses to bring unity says it is not about us all thinking the same thing. It is about finding healthy ways to argue graciously.

So it begins and ends with the grace of Christ. Then it goes on to the mind of Christ. Churches that have unity, I believe, have a common, not unanimous, not everybody thinking exactly the same, but a common view of who Christ is and what Christ said and what Christ wants. In this particular church, we feel that we are built on God's Word, that we seek truth with humility, and because of those two things, built on God's Word, seeking truth with humility. Because of those two things, we are unafraid to talk about anything. Here everything must be safe to talk about, especially for the young ones among us. They have questions. We need to say something other than, "Don't talk about that. You'll create waves." "Ohhhhh! Christians don't think like that. That is just stupid." So if we seek to have the mind of Christ, we need to be unafraid to talk about anything and make this a safe place, so that people who disagree with other people can feel like nobody gets kicked off the island here.

Churches that preserve the unity of the Body of Christ are founded on grace to seek the mind of Christ, but then the third thing I would say is that they learn in tiny ways like we saw on the video to share the love of Christ. This church needs to be present when others judge us. We need to walk toward others when they start to walk away from us. We need to serve people, especially people with whom we disagree. We need to find ways to serve them, building bridges with humility and service that nobody argues against. How many churches are there in the United States? I counted 27 different congregations just in Edina's telephone directory. There are 3,000-plus congregations in Minneapolis alone. There are over 300,000 congregations in just

the United States. How many churches are there in the United States? There is one church. Jesus only has one church.

I thought maybe the best way I could bring that home would be to have you look at the wall here. *(Slide shown.)* Jeremy just took a bunch of different pictures of this community and put them together in a montage because I was saying the other day that the image I wanted to end with, having one church, was that passage from Revelations 7, so look for your face up there or where it should be and listen to this.

⁹ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne
and to the Lamb.”

¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying:

“Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!”

Then they didn't have to worry about any stupid, little church fights.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You said You would set up Your church, and the gates of hell could not shut it down, much less the stupid, little arguments of human beings. I ask You to come and fill this church with Your Spirit that brings joy and love and grace so that we might wallow, we might revel, in the way that You have made our sisters and brothers agents of Your love and that You might show us how to do our part. In the Name of the Father, in the Name of the Son, in the Name of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.