

That They May All Be One

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Romans 14: 1- 19 and John 17: 20-24

One of you motioned to me at Rally Day last Sunday and said, “Pastor Beth, I really need to talk to you!” I thought to myself, “Oh, no. What’s going on? Is someone sick, maybe even dying? Do we have a marriage in trouble? Gosh, maybe a child is experimenting with drugs?” But it was none of these things. Instead the news was good news! This person went on to say, “I’m worried you’re hearing only bad things about our church. I want to sit down and tell you how much I love this church!”

First of all, I want to assure all of you that I’m not just hearing bad things about St. Peter’s. I’m hearing from many, many people who love this church. Here at our church lots of folks are hard at work being God’s partners in the process of creating God’s Kingdom at St. Peter’s and in Elmhurst. These are the good things that I’ve uncovered so far about St. Peter’s Church:

- You have extremely committed congregational leadership.
- This church has exceptionally strong informal systems of caring for each other.
- Many of you are bursting with creativity and a “let’s just do it” attitude.
- Your lay leaders have the ability to plan, organize, and execute crucial church functions.
- There is a strong foundational church history that honors the past and builds on traditions.
- You are a “forgiving” church that recognizes we are all human and accepts us as we are.
- This church has wonderful, wonderful, super wonderful staff!
- And lastly, wow - can you cook! This is VERY bad for my Weight Watchers initiative but I love it and so does my husband Paul.

So please juxtaposition what I’m about to say with all the positive things I’m finding out about this congregation. I have had two disheartening conversations with parishioners since I’ve been here that I want to share with you and talk about in light of this morning’s scripture.

The first conversation I want to reflect on was a phone call I received the first week I was here. It was from a long-time parishioner who shall remain nameless. The caller has been a member of St. Peter's Church for forty-five years. What made me sad about this conversation was that the caller was calling to tell me that he has decided to resign his membership at St. Peter's Church. I want to say though that we have yet to receive a letter from him asking to have his membership terminated. I'm hoping that there is some light at the end of the tunnel and that he may change his mind. His issue is with some recent actions taken by Elmhurst College, which is affiliated with the United Church of Christ. And because St. Peter's Church is also affiliated with the United Church of Christ the caller said he was extremely uncomfortable being a member of our church. He went on to say that, in his opinion, in recent years St. Peter's Church has become too liberal.

The second conversation I had was a couple of days later. It was with someone, who again shall remain nameless, who had been a very active member, on Church Council among other things, for nine years before asking a few years ago to be removed from our membership rolls. When I delved into her reasons for leaving our church I discovered that among other things, in her opinion, St. Peter's Church was not liberal enough. She thinks the church is too conservative and stuck in the past.

So we have one person who is thinking about terminating his membership at St. Peter's because we're too liberal. And we have a second person who actually did leave the church because we are not liberal enough. How unfortunate!

Let me read you something off of the United Church of Christ website. The following is under the section called "What We Believe." It says, "**We believe the UCC is called to be a united and uniting church.** 'That they may all be one.' (John 17:21) 'In essentials—unity, in nonessentials—diversity, in all things—charity.' "It goes on to say, "The UCC has no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures. Its overarching creed is love. UCC pastors and teachers are known for their commitment to excellence in theological preparation, interpretation of the scripture and justice advocacy. Even so, love and unity in the midst of our diversity are our greatest assets." (that's the end of the quote.)

In my opinion, our diversity may be one of our greatest assets but it's also one of our most difficult challenges of being a member of the United Church of Christ. As the UCC website says, our denomination has no rigid formulation of doctrine

or attachment to creeds. Some of our churches are theologically very liberal; they look at the Bible as true without being literally true. Some of our churches are theologically very conservative; they believe every word exactly as it is written in the Bible. But all our churches share the same basic beliefs. All UCC churches believe in the Trinity - God the Creator, the resurrected Christ who is the Head of the church, and the Holy Spirit. All UCC churches believe that each person is unique and valuable. All UCC churches believe that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God. All UCC churches believe in inviting all people of faith to join us with Christ at our communion table. And all UCC churches believe that God calls us to be servants in the service of others.

I am well aware that it is easier and more comfortable to be part of a congregation where we all think and feel the same way. But our uniqueness and our strength as a denomination is our diversity and our spiritual lives are much enriched by our uniqueness. I can tell you it is much more interesting to be a pastor in a church where people are distinctive in their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs rather than robotically thinking and acting alike. We are all enlivened and enriched when we are challenged by different ways of thinking and new ways of being faithful to God.

As we try to get along and as we try to be Christians and good members in standing at St. Peter's Church the issues seem to boil down to these two questions:

- If we vehemently disagree with each other how do we accept each other? In other words, how do we get along, without feeling as if our only option is to terminate our relationship with the church?
- And, what does it mean to be respectful of others even if we don't agree?

Let's look once again at our scripture from Romans. It begins, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?"

Now I don't know about you, but I find it's pretty easy to say, "That woman is a vegan. She doesn't eat meat or dairy products. I accept that." I can agree with the Apostle Paul when he says that we shouldn't pass judgment on people just because of what they eat or don't eat.

But it becomes much harder to *not* pass judgment when we are talking about social issues - such things as illegal immigration, the homeless, gun laws, school reform, crime, casino gambling, etc. In the time Paul was writing his letter to the Roman Christians, what people ate was a significant social issue. This particular issue had the power to split the church. And social issues are still splitting our churches today. Our churches are splitting over such issues as how we interpret the Bible, welcoming gays and lesbians, and how we reach out to those in need. In order for our churches to survive in today's world, we need to find ways to avoid being split apart by social issues.

Accepting each other, even if we intensely disagree, means listening to each other – it means staying in relationship with each other and struggling to understand the other. It does not mean that we have to accept each other's thinking. What we say to ourselves is, "Whether I agree with you or not, I seek to interact with you because we both value diversity and unity in our church and we both share the same fundamental Christian beliefs. I want to hear you out." Our scripture this morning encourages us to be respectful of each other, even if we don't agree. And we show this respect by staying in relationship, listening, and trying to understand the other's beliefs. Our goal is to seek understanding, not always consensus. In a church as large as St. Peter's, we are never going to agree about everything.

The Romans passage admonishes us against narrow interpretation of what it is to follow Jesus, suggesting a wideness of toleration and radical openness. We need to know ourselves as being rooted in God. When we are securely rooted in God we can be generous enough to accept others as worshipping and working partners who are different from ourselves. The path God leads us on, staying in relationship and really trying to at least understand how another is thinking and feeling, will not be easy, but God remains with us on the journey.

"That they may all be one." This is the motto of the United Church of Christ. And I know that many of you warmly embrace this motto here at St. Peter's United Church of Christ. I know it is not easy for any of us to not only accept but affirm people who think and believe differently than we. But because we are the United Church of Christ, love and unity in the midst of our diversity is our greatest asset and will make us desirable as a church home for generations to come.

Amen.