

Title: Being One: The New Math
Text: John 17: 20 – 24
Date: June 2, 2019

Last week our text was from John 14, and I commented then that, appropriately, this was a part of what is called Jesus' extended "Farewell Discourse." Today's text from John 17 is actually from the concluding words of this long farewell. More specifically, these particular words were part of a prayer.

In the beginning of this chapter we find Jesus praying for himself. Starting with verse 6 we find Jesus praying for his disciples, and then starting with verse 20 we find Jesus praying for all who would follow on his path.

Today's passage begins, **"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word."** (17:20) I don't know if this needs to be spelled out any more clearly, but this is really Jesus praying for the likes of *us* gathered here this morning.

And the focal point of that prayer? Jesus prays, **"that they may all be one. . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one."** (17: 21, 23) Hmmm. Jesus prays for our unity. So here's a question for you: *How are we doing in that department?* I'd like to reflect on this globally, regionally, and within an SPC context.

The **World Christian Encyclopedia** (Oxford University Press) estimated that there were at least 33,000 denominations. A denomination is defined as **"an organized Christian group within a country"**.

The **Center for the Study of Global Christianity** (at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) estimated upwards of 43,000 denominations. These numbers have exploded from 1,600 in the year 1900.

It's a slightly tricky question, because to some extent it depends on how you define "denomination." This would also include various branches of Lutherans, for example, and various branches of Presbyterians. Here is an interesting tidbit: There are 242 Roman Catholic denominations. There are about 9,000 protestant denominations. The largest component (something like two thirds to three quarters) of these totals are "independent" churches, of which there are about 22,000. This would include an array of colorful names such as:

- African Independent Apostolic
- Black American Apostolic
- Filipino Apostolic
- Indian Apostolic
- Chinese Charismatic
- Word of Faith / Prosperity groups
- Independent Baptists
- Hidden Buddhist believers in Christ
- schismatic Conservative Catholics
- Independent Estonian Orthodox
- Independent Hungarian Orthodox
- Messianic, Jewish-Christian congregations
- Independent "Latin-rite" Catholics

. . . to name just a few.

Of course, counting denominations is only one way to approach the question of “unity.” Looking within our own denomination, we have learned more about who we are as Presbyterians through some extensive “listening groups” that were conducted in recent years.

The Research Services report found that 79 percent of the Presbyterian respondents fell into four categories:

- *Disappointed and Discerning (19 percent)*: Those who are disappointed with their PC(USA) affiliation but feel stuck in the denomination for various reasons, or who are conflicted and thinking about leaving.
- *Rooted and Resolute (10 percent)*: Those who consider their PC(USA) identity to be very important, but feel that the denomination has strayed from the Bible, bowed to the demands of secular culture and/or gotten too involved in liberal politics.
- *Family Facilitators (15 percent)*: Those who value the PC(USA)’s theological diversity and would prefer reconciliation between liberals and conservatives.
- *Purposeful Progressives (35 percent)*: Those who would prefer that the PC(USA) narrow its focus to claim a more progressive identity both for theological reasons and to gain cultural relevance and its own societal niche.

Yes, it is true that over the past six years in particular, it is generally agreed that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has become more liberal. Many here (but not all!) will be encouraged to hear this.

Presbyterians are committed to their local congregations, and they take pride in the PC(USA)’s history, form of government, and the idea of being a connectional church. But they don’t agree on where authority in the denomination should lie – and many hold strong negative views about the denomination’s national leadership.

There is also disagreement about how politicized or activist the PC(USA) should be, and about what it means to be a countercultural voice in the world.

On a regional level, Jeff Hornbeck and I recently attended a meeting of the Shenandoah Presbytery where we broke into five smaller groups and had a discussion on white privilege. I didn’t make a point of comparing notes with Jeff, but I was surprisingly impressed with the caliber of the discussion in my group. Compared to some stories I have heard from the past, it seemed to me as though there is some room to be hopeful within this Presbytery.

So I ask you again: *Was Jesus prayer for our unity effective?* Some might think that there is such a lack of unity in the church worldwide that it is something of a joke.

I am sure many of you have heard a sermon or two on Christian unity over the years. In many instances statistics like those that we were just exposed to were used to make us feel profoundly guilty . . . like we have really made a mess of things. Many a sermon would then stress the importance of doctrinal purity. Some pastors get worked up in a lather while warning us of the dangers of being overly casual about our faith. It was stressed that we need to discuss these issues with the utmost seriousness. Often Paul’s metaphor of the Body of Christ is used, and it is made clear how obvious it is that we can’t tear the body of Christ apart. Right?

If you want a disturbing reminder of our roots, hear these words of John Calvin: **“Those who disrupt the body of Christ and split its unity into schisms are quite excluded from the hope of salvation, so long as they remain in dissidence of this kind.”** That’s pretty extreme!

I think Augustine's approach was a little more gentle when he said: **"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."** This very thought is actually referred to a lot in Presbyterian circles. It is good to have a guiding principle like that.

You want to know what I use as a guiding principle? You might not like it at first, but my hope is that if you sit with it for a few minutes, you might come to appreciate the wisdom in it.

"Ash Wednesday" was the first poem that T.S. Eliot wrote after his conversion to Anglicanism in 1927, and the concluding verses are printed on your bulletin cover. In both the first and sixth sections of this long poem there is this profound line that I often draw on: **"Teach us to care, and not to care."**

Rather than feigning to channel Eliot's spirit in interpreting this, let me say how this speaks to me. The tendency to get tripped up lies in putting the emphasis on just one part of the line. Some of you might be ready to leave for home now saying, *"Well, the pastor told us not to care!"* Well that would not exactly be fair, would it?

- We should care about a splintered church in the world!
- We should care that Sunday morning is one of the most segregated times of the week!
- We should care that some of the church has lost its courage to speak boldly on social issues!
- We should care that for many the faith has been reduced to a list of doctrinal bullet points to sign off on!
- We should care that the faith we profess has waning appeal to the next generation!
- We should care that much of the church teaches us to be lords over creation, rather than stewards of creation!
- We should care that much of the church derives a sense of power and privilege by looking down on "the other," rather than being willing to die for "the other!"
- We should care that many churches are more interested in their own survival, than they are in reflecting God's intentions on earth!
- We should care that for many "being Christian" is synonymous with "being American," and that a "God and country" idolatry is being taught in church!
- We *should* care! I *do* care!

All of these issues I just listed are vital, and I might imagine a younger version of myself being consumed with a passion for these issues – *literally*. Yet sometimes it is "caring" with unbridled enthusiasm that causes divisions in the first place. Maybe it is my "second half of life energy," but I have also discovered a certain call to let go – a wisdom in both "caring" and "not caring." It takes a certain maturity to hold this in balance. Buddhist teaching emphasizes both *compassion* and *detachment*.

Some Christians who are altogether stressed about hanging on to their precious church building need to let go. They need to "not care." They might simply be going through birth pangs as God desires to give birth to something altogether new.

On the other hand, some Christians have so mastered the art of "not caring," that they need to relearn how to weep as God weeps. Their heart needs to be moved by the plight of those entrenched in generational systems of poverty.

We do indeed need to care . . . and not care.

I also see relevance to this at this juncture when you are on the verge of calling a new pastor. As amazing as this new person will be, it is likely that this person will not totally meet your personal discriminating standards. May you care, and not care.

I have a pastor friend who does indeed have progressive social views, but spends more time preaching about the interface of faith and psyche. He is currently flying back and forth to Zurich periodically as part of becoming credentialed as a Jungian analyst. Alas, some bemoan that he doesn't preach more on social issues.

I have another pastor friend who is always challenging the congregation on social issues, and keeping them stretched. Alas, some feel that she doesn't speak to individual hopes and fears enough.

Whoever you call, your unity will depend on caring . . . and not caring. The church is bigger than any one person, and it may not be realistic for any one person to fully live into the incredible, rarified, exacting standards that you alone have.

May your oneness lie not in your strivings for perfection, but in the vision that the Divine has for who you already are. May you grow into a contemplative awareness that enables you both to care . . . and not care. All will be well. Don't stress. I'll be praying for you.

Amen.

John 17: 20 – 24 *These are the words of Jesus as he prays*

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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. 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. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.