

As we begin week nine of our *Becoming a Healthy Disciple* series, our focus continues to move outward as we think about how a healthy disciple “Networks with the Body of Christ,” which is the larger Church in its many expressions. One of the blessings of going on mission trips or being connected with other Christians in places like Puerto Rico, North Carolina, Alabama, the Dominican Republic, India, Bulgaria, Italy, or France is we discover that there’s a lot of diversity in the Body of Christ around the world. There are different ways of worshiping, preaching, praying, of expressing the faith, of engaging with the community, of sharing God’s love in practical ways. The way we do it, or the way we’re most familiar with or comfortable with isn’t the only way of doing almost anything that the church or disciples do. At a time when there is a great deal of talk about the divisions and the polarization between different groups in the United States, disciples of Christ should be steadfast champions of the truth that we have a deeper connection that transcends so many of the barriers that some people construct and propagate to divide people rather than bring them together. It’s sad that too often many Christians are better at dividing than uniting. The longest recorded prayer of Jesus that we have in the Bible is in *John 17* and one of the main themes is the desire of Christ that His followers would be united and be one.

In the presence of his followers Jesus is praying about returning to the Father as we join in listening to the *Gospel of John 17:13-26* (NRSV). “But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in **the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves**. I have given them **your word**, and **the world** has hated them because they do not belong to **the world**, just as I do not belong to **the world**. I am not asking you to take them out of **the world**, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to **the world**, just as I do not belong to **the world**. Sanctify them in **the truth**; your word is **truth**. As you have **sent me** into **the world**, **so I have sent them** into **the world**. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

“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. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, **so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.**”

Unity in the church is not easy to achieve. In fact, in many ways, the Christian church has been marked by disunity from the beginning. Remember the controversy about the inclusion of the Gentiles in the *Book of Acts*? Later there were theological controversies in the early centuries after the days of the apostles. Not only has the history of Christianity been marked by a lack of unity, Christians and churches have been complicit in violence and abuse against other Christians as well as people of different faiths, cultures, skin colors, and beliefs on virtually every continent. The Church of Jesus Christ has been disunited and far more like the world—greedy, violent, and grasping for power—for too much of its history. Unfortunately, disunity continues today in many churches over serious, silly and even unbiblical things. Some churches have split over race, the style of music, minor disagreements with the pastor, or because of cliques within the church.

Whenever there is ungodly disunity in the church, it's difficult for the world to see that we love Jesus and that God loves us and that we love one another and our neighbors. **Jesus prayed the world would know that we know him by our love for each other, and by our unity with one another in the Gospel.** What is Unity? Unity is not unanimity. Jesus doesn't mean his disciples will always agree on everything. Baptists and Catholics have different views of the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. Baptists and Methodists have different views of baptism. Baptists and Episcopalians and Lutherans have different approaches to liturgy and worship. Regardless of these differences, we can still work together in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in pursuit of Christian goals. Unity, as Jesus prays for it, emphasizes the patient pursuit of harmony among his disciples for the good of the church, for the glory of the Father and the Son, and for the salvation of those who haven't heard the good news of God's love in Christ, even as the church might disagree over certain important matters.

The healthy disciple's model for unity is Jesus and the Father. Jesus says "I and the Father are one." This does not mean that they're the same people, because Jesus is the Son and not the Father. But the Father and the Son are unified. There's continuity between the Father and the Son. In a similar way, there should be continuity and harmony amongst the people of God.

There is a great longing in people today for belonging, community, connection, and hope. Jesus says we find these when we are united with Christ and with one another through our shared faith, the Spirit, and the Word—these make up the foundation of our unity. The world often highlights material things and belongings while sowing seeds of disunity, distrust, differences, and division. Most of us have probably seen the terrible video of Paradise, California after the catastrophic fires. Over 60 are dead in California, hundreds are missing. Many of those who escaped have lost everything materially—their homes, possessions and their communities. Lives have been lost, countless are homeless. How do you feel united and connected when all is stripped away so abruptly? Whether in California or in so many other places where destruction, famine, war, or violence has driven people from their homes, how do people find a unifying sense of connection? Often it's through even small acts of love and compassion. Sometimes disasters can bring out both the best and worst in people. At our best we see acts of love, service and generosity.

When Jesus spoke his prayer in *John 17*, he knew his time on earth was nearing the end. We're also only on this earth for a relatively short time and like Christ we're to be instruments of love, compassion, unity, and hope. There's far more that unites us to other Christians and other human beings than there is that divides us. Often, Christians wonder why people refuse to trust in or believe in Jesus. There are all sorts of answers to that question, but one answer is because of the disunity and a lack of love within the church. Disunity and failure of love in the church or demonstrated by Christians is a reason that some people are pushed away from The Way of Christ. When churches or Christians fight, bicker and divide, they provide no incentives for other people to come to faith in Jesus. **Unity creates belief. Disunity fosters disbelief.** Who wants to board a ship of bickering sailors? Paul Billheimer may be right when he says, "The continuous and widespread fragmentation of the Church has been the scandal of the ages. It has been Satan's master strategy. The sin of disunity probably has caused more souls to be lost than all other sins combined."

In my study at church I have volumes of sermons by a 19th century English Baptist preacher my grandfathers both appreciated named Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892). In one sermon he describes a conflict between the "low church" approach of Baptists like himself and the "high churchism" of others. He speaks as Jesus does in *John 17* about how disciples are to be known by our love even with those with whom we may disagree. Spurgeon said, "Where the Spirit of God is there must be love, and if I have once known and recognized any man to be my brother in Christ Jesus, the love of Christ constraineth me **no more to think of him as a stranger or foreigner, but a fellow citizen with the saints.** Now I hate High Churchism as my soul hates Satan; but I love George Herbert, although George Herbert is a desperately High Churchman. I hate his High Churchism, but I love George Herbert from my very soul, and I have a warm corner in my heart for every man who is like him. Let me find a man who loves my Lord Jesus Christ as George Herbert did and **I do not ask myself whether I shall love him or not; there is no room for question, for I cannot help myself; unless I can leave off loving Jesus Christ, I cannot cease loving those who love him.** (*The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons, vol. XII, 6*). What would it look like if we loved everyone who stated they also loved Jesus Christ no matter what other matters we disagreed on?

Wherever there is faith, repentance, and a new birth, there is a Christian. When we meet a person whose faith is in the cross and whose eyes are on the Savior, we meet a brother or a sister. Wasn't that Paul's approach? When he wrote the church in Corinth, he addressed a body of Christians guilty of every sin from abusing the Lord's Supper to arguing over the Holy Spirit. But how does he address them? "I beg you, **brothers and sisters**" (*1 Corinthians 1:10* NCV). When the church in Rome was debating whether to eat meat offered to idols, did Paul tell them to start two churches? One for the meat-eaters and one for the non-meat-eaters? No, on the contrary, he urged, "**Christ accepted you, so you should accept each other, which will bring glory to God.**" (*Romans 15:7* NCV)

Is God asking us to do anything more than what he has already done? Hasn't God gone a long way in accepting us? If a Holy God can tolerate my mistakes, can't I tolerate the mistakes of

others? If God allows me, with my failures and struggles, to call him Father, shouldn't I extend the same grace to others? "They are God's servants," Paul reminds us in (*Romans 14:4* TLB), "not yours. They are responsible to him, not to you. Let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. And God is able to make them do as they should."

The fellowship of the Church is a grand vessel. Just as a ship has many rooms, so God's kingdom has room for many opinions. But just as a ship has one main deck, God's kingdom has a common ground: the all-sufficient grace and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

What is the purpose of our love and unity in Christ? **Twice Jesus tells us** once in *verse 21*, "**so that the world may believe** that you have sent me," and again in *verse 23*, "**to let the world know that you sent me** and have loved them even as you have loved me." When the church begins to demonstrate the unity of faith, the unity of shared truth, love, and shared life in the Spirit of Christ, that's when the world will discover that Jesus is Lord; that He indeed holds the key to history and to meaning, that He is indeed the revelation of the invisible God.

One way we can share in prayer and unity with other Christians on Cape Cod is a monthly prayer gathering that moves from church to church and takes place on the fourth Wednesday of the month. These gatherings are organized by a group called the Glory of God on Cape Cod. The next monthly prayer gathering is Wednesday, November 28th at 6:30 pm at Forestdale Church located at 110 Route 130 in Forestdale. Pastor Bruce Hanlon of Forestdale Church wrote the following: "Praying with brothers and sisters from across Cape Cod is, at least in part, a fulfillment of the prayer of Jesus. The Glory of God on Cape Cod is not about gathering together those considered super-spiritual. This is not an "old-person" thing or a "young-person" thing. It's not an American gathering, a black or white gathering, a gathering for the materially wealthy or the poor. This is a gathering to strengthen and unite the bride of Christ, His Church, to meet the challenges of our day. It's an opportunity to arouse the sleeping giant of the Church to shine the light Christ. Yes, through our words, but most especially through our unity and the love we have for one another and for this hurting world. It's about being the answer to the prayer of Jesus. I look forward to welcoming you on November 28th at 6:30 pm at Forestdale Church."

Jesus in *John 17*, knowing the end is near, he prays one final time for his followers. It's striking, isn't it, that he prayed not for their success, safety or happiness. He prayed for their unity. He prayed that they'd love each other. As he prayed for them, he also prayed for "those who will believe because of their teaching." That means us! In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I and all other disciples would be one.

Prayer: Lord, you have made me one with believers in all places in all times. May that unity be reflected in all that I do.

Blessing: "Love one another with mutual affection." (*Romans 12:10*) "All of you, have...sympathy, mutual love, a tender heart, and a humble mind." (*1 Peter 3:8*)

Questions for Discussion & Reflection:

1. List the diversity of your existing relationships. Start with those you know in a general sense, and then write down those you know who are within the family of God. How can you foster new relationships with others in the Christian community who are more diverse and can enhance your understanding of the unity of the body of Christ?
2. When is the last time you participated in a worship service that was different from your norm? Jot down observations about the unique elements of that worship service. In what ways did the diversity of the body of Christ express itself in that worship service? What about that service helped you engage at a deeper level with true, God-exalting worship?
3. As you review your personal prayer journal, how much diversity is expressed on the pages before you? In what ways can you expand the direction of your prayers on behalf of the larger body of Christ?
4. In the coming year, where can you go within the body of Christ to grow your connections with other ethnic communities or your experiences of multid denominational relationships? Who within your existing fellowship or small group can travel this new relationship journey with you and hold you accountable to taking this step forward?
5. What ministry opportunities can you take advantage of in the coming year that will take you into new arenas of service for the sake of sharing the gospel and expanding the kingdom of God? Explore and select one or more, and watch how God expands your horizons for service within the body of Christ!