

Togetherness
(John 17:1–11, 1 Peter 4:12–14, 5:6–11)

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According to the liturgical calendar, today is Ascension Sunday, which refers to when Jesus rose to the heavens and promised that the Holy Spirit would come and be with the disciples where he could not. The reading in John 17 is titled “Jesus’s Last Prayer” and in it he encapsulates that he came to be with them, that he accomplished what he was sent to do and prays that they be “one heart and one mind” and that the world will believe by seeing that the disciples are together with God.

Jesus knew that there was strength in togetherness. Just like a rope that is made up of many strands but braided together is stronger than any one of those individual strands. Jesus also knew that there would be struggles, dangers, and that the disciples were afraid. We saw that fear pretty clearly during Holy Week. During that last supper, they tell Jesus they are willing to die with him, yet they scatter and deny their knowledge of him. When the women run from the tomb to tell the disciples that they have seen Jesus, they don’t believe it. It sounds pretty preposterous on the surface of things, doesn’t it? They watched him die. Even though he told them that he had to die in order to fulfill his purpose, they were sure it was the end. In fear they scattered, but then gathered to huddle in that upper room and wonder what they were going to do next.

Even in those moments of what must have felt like deepest despair, they regrouped and stayed together in their fear. Jesus had made them into a community, and they needed to be together. Then, miracle of miracles, he appeared to them many times, and they believed he had risen from the dead. This was it! This was the start of something spectacular, they were sure of it. Their immortal leader would be with them and guide them and continue to tell them what to do. But wait, not so fast. He leaves them again. But before he does, he tells them to go into the world and tell his story to everyone. Go, he tells them, and I will send you someone who can be with you everywhere all the time, no matter where you are. Go, but remember that you are mine, and I am yours, and we are one.

In First Peter, the message of togetherness or oneness continues. Peter opens his letter saying he is writing to the “Exiles scattered to the four winds. No one is missing, no one is forgotten.” Then in the opening of chapter five, he tells church leaders to lead because you want to please God, not because of what you might gain out of it, and not to put on airs and to be content with who you are. The Bible Project explains that Peter is speaking to non-Jewish Christians telling them that they are adopted into the New Family and that they all are one. To take heart, that having hope in the midst of suffering deepens one’s faith.

Circling back to the reading in John, the Bible Project's view of chapters 13–17 is that Jesus is telling his disciples to fulfill the “great command” to bear witness to the truth that is a new way to be human. This new way was demonstrated by Jesus: welcoming the outcast, healing the sick, and speaking up to the powerful. But even though Jesus was God's Son and the Promised Messiah, in this incarnation he was still human, and as a human being he could physically be in only one place at a time. By his resurrection and ascension, he promised that the Spirit would come and be with his followers, and that the Spirit would have the ability to be with everyone, everywhere, all the time.

Togetherness and community . . . Fast forward two thousand years. How have we put this message into practice? I'm not sure we have done a good job of that. Jesus's message has been broken up into denominations that pick and choose what parts of the message they believe the most, and if not tossing the rest, at best giving it only lip service. Togetherness and community are hard to find these days. All over the world we see laws being enacted that are meant to separate some from the whole; laws that exile family from each other and those deemed “other” from the society of their community. Laws that are racially or homophobically motivated. As a society, we are continually told that people who don't look like us, act like us, and worship like us shouldn't be welcomed as part of our community. What would Jesus say about that? What truth to power would he have to say at our school board meetings, city council meetings, state government halls, and the halls of our national congress—or even our church council meetings? How far have we strayed from Jesus telling us we need to be “one heart, one mind” with God?

I have been attending Centre Street Church since 1998. When I started attending, Jerry Fritz was the pastor, and he had either just resigned or announced his intention to resign. We had an interim for a bit, then Gini King was called to be our pastor. I had never been a part of a church with a female pastor; my parents were shocked! “Really, a female pastor?” they asked. We were a bigger congregation then, with lots of committees and people to serve on them—a really big family.

In togetherness we voted to become an Open and Affirming Church, and I was so proud when we did that. But like all families, things happened. People died, moved away, squabbles happened, money got tight, tensions rose, things were said that couldn't be taken back, and the togetherness became difficult to maintain. Instead of growing pains, we had shrinking pains. During one of the more difficult times over the past twenty-plus years, I struggled with wanting to come to church on Sundays. And frankly, if I hadn't made the commitment to be in the choir, I might not have. Even though I struggled with not wanting to be here, once I arrived, I was glad that I came. I realized that for me, the church is more about the togetherness and community I find here than it is about the pastor. Don't get me wrong, some pastors are great, and they are good leaders and teachers, but some are just not.

Coming to this realization was critical in keeping me here and moving me forward on my faith walk. The decision to go to a half-time pastor was a painful one, but out of it came our strong lay

leadership. I would not be up here delivering a sermon if we had been able to continue with a full-time pastor. And while you all might glean something from what I have to say on my Sundays in the pulpit, what I gain from the process of liturgy readings and pulling my thoughts and prayers together helps me remember how important this community is and how precious togetherness is.

In looking back over all my years attending one church or another, what I see in hindsight are churches where the pastor did most everything and the congregation let them. Oh, the congregation attended, sang in the choir, and served on committees, but having a pastor can sometimes mean that we all kinda sit back and let someone else do the work. Having served on the Pastoral Relations Committee in the past, I can remember hearing, “That’s what we pay the pastor to do” many, many times.

What does the message of togetherness and Oneness have to tell us here today? I believe that Jesus had to leave and send the disciples out into the world, or the message would not have grown to be anything more than local folklore. Jesus is telling us to remember his example of how to be human, to be in community with everyone, and that the Spirit gives us the opportunity to show others the generous and inclusive love Jesus demonstrated while with us through his human ministry. Go, Jesus says, and remember that you are mine, I am yours, and we are one. Amen.