

“One for the Road”
John 17:20-26
May 16, 2010

Once upon a time there was a Presbyterian family that moved into town, and they bought a house next door to a Baptist family. The two families had small children, and one day they decided to get together and they went to a park for a picnic. When they got there, the 6-year-old Baptist girl took the 5-year-old Presbyterian boy by the hand and led him down to the lake to go wading. But since their parents had told them not to get their clothes wet, the Baptist girl figured that the only way that was possible was for her to take her clothes off. When she did, the little Presbyterian boy's eyes went wide open and he said, "Boy, my parents were right. There really is a difference between Presbyterians and Baptists."

Here in John's Gospel, Jesus prays that whatever our differences, we all might be one. We grab hold of that in our Disciples tradition, and we quote Barton Stone - "Unity is our polar star. If we oppose the union of believers, we oppose directly the will of God, the prayer of Jesus... and the salvation of the world." He nails it, doesn't he? Today, our Disciples identity statement says that we are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. So, we are very comfortable in SAYING that we want to be whole and in SAYING that we want to be one.

But, it is really hard because Jesus is not sitting in the pew putting his hand over our mouths when we need to hush, or slapping our finger before we hit send. Sometimes, I wish he had not been so anxious to get back to heaven. I wish he had stayed around to preach, and feed, and heal. Faith would be less stressful. Think how relaxing Sunday mornings would be! We could go to brunch – no need for church because we could follow Jesus on Facebook – that might even get him on Saturday Night Live. If Jesus were still here, he'd probably have a sermon or two on YouTube with limited commercial interruption. We could tweet with him every day. Faith would be effortless – Jesus: Just a Click Away. But, instead as we heard last week, we get the great news that, yes, Jesus is alive, but "in a little while, you will see me no more." The one who on Easter says "Good Morning, World" soon says "see ya."

I've been thinking about that – how God isn't right here to say 'yay or nay or kiss my foot.' I think about my piano lessons. I have to have them every week or I won't practice nearly as hard. I wonder if that same mentality gets absorbed into faith – because we're not sitting in front of God next Thursday to show him what we've learned, might our daily practice seem a little less important? It's ok to admit because Jesus KNEW how we would be. Before his death, Jesus knew his absence would be hard on his disciples. So, prays, and he prays and he prays.

What would help my disciples? Ah, that they all may be one, and oh, how that goes against our nature. It is just that oneness that the church has never shown the world. You cannot imagine the number of books that have been written about division in the church with titles that should embarrass us as Christians. "Never Call Them Jerks" by Arthur Boers. "Antagonists in the Church" by Kenneth Haugk. "Clergy Killers" by Lloyd Rediger. Those are scary titles for a born-again library – titles that suggest we Christians don't do so well with both loving God and loving neighbor. I'm not sure that it is even a priority anymore. I saw an article about a church housed in a movie theater. The pastor talked about worshipping in this dark setting. He said, "When, people can really see the person beside them, there's an element of self-consciousness. They're looking at their neighbor instead of really focusing on God." Really? How's that for a church life tip – just don't look at each other, don't pay any attention to your neighbor.

But, hidden or in view, the neighbor is there, and how do we “be one?” Over the past two weeks, we’ve talked about God welcoming everybody and we’ve heard that the Holy Spirit comes alongside us – so does the Spirit just take every person we are to welcome and mush us all together until we feel warm and fuzzy? See, the church sugars up unity – makes it sweet and pretends that it means we feel warm and mushy and always agree. But, that’s not unity. Read your Bible. Even back in the Old Testament, Moses got so frustrated with his flock that HIS prayer was “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” Does he sound warm and mushy to you? Yet, they made it to the Promised Land. Or, look at Paul. “You foolish Galatians!” he writes. Does that sound like perfect agreement?

And, consider this. We are not always in agreement with God. Mother Teresa recognized that. She said that people often ask her what they can do to live their lives better. She says, “smile at each other; smile at your wife, smile at your children, smile at your husband, smile at each other – it doesn’t matter who it is – and that will help you to grow up in greater love for each other.” And, one person listening in couldn’t resist and said, “Right. Are you married?” And, she said: “Yes, and I find it difficult sometimes to smile at Jesus.”

Christian unity is not all smiles and agreement. It would be nice if it was. That would simplify our work. Church could be about making points – recruiting others to your point of view - making phone calls and writing letters and doing whatever it takes to get the agreement. Man, that would be so much easier. But, that cheapens the power of the resurrection. Jesus did not die and rise again just so we could get our way. He rose again to give us the redemption and the power of the Spirit to live out his message.

I think we could learn something from Elvis fans here. This New York minister who is a HUGE Elvis fan described her pilgrimage to the holy land ... Memphis, Tennessee - the home of Elvis. While there, she visited Sun Records, where Elvis recorded his first song. In the studio, a duct tape “X” was on the floor indicating the exact spot where Elvis stood. The tour guide told them that just the week before, Bob Dylan had come into the studio, said not a word to anyone, walked over to the “X,” got down on all fours, kissed it and walked out. For many, Elvis has reached an almost holy status. In fact, there are studies on the parallels between Jesus and Elvis, most notably by the renowned scholar Adam Sandler. He explains: Jesus said: “Love thy neighbor.” (Matthew 22:39); Elvis said: “Don’t be cruel.” (RCA, 1956) Jesus is part of the Trinity; Elvis’ first band was a trio. Jesus is the Lord’s shepherd; Elvis dated Cybil Sheppard.

So, this minister visited Graceland. While waiting in line, she turned to a tour guide and asked, “How long did Elvis actually live here?” There was an audible gasp from the surrounding crowd. The guide looked at her with shock and whispered, “We don’t use the past tense here.” She then pointed at her t-shirt, which read: “Graceland, where Elvis LIVES.”

It didn’t matter that she had never actually seen Elvis or that technically Elvis stopped walking the earth over thirty-two years ago. It didn’t matter. She didn’t care. Elvis fans don’t care. Without any proof, they believe he lives! Elvis lives, baby. The King lives.

It’s a shame our lives aren’t all driven by that kind of faith. Those Elvis fans not only believe he lives, they act like he lives. They are united in their search for Elvis. And, sometimes, they even find him. There have been Elvis sightings all over the world--from a spa in Tokyo to a Burger King in Michigan. There was even a woman who claimed that she found the image of Elvis in a taco shell. If only we’d put even 1% of that kind of energy towards looking for Jesus, we might actually find him too. Maybe we’d find him in the eyes of a little child or the downcast gaze of a nursing home resident. Maybe we’d find him in the face of an

enemy or the tears of a loved one with whom we are fighting. If you believe he lives, you'll act like he lives. You'll look for him and you'll find him.

That changes everything. You see, because they believe he lives, Elvis fans do more than smile and feel warm and fuzzy in Graceland. They go into the world to share his message. They play Elvis' music; they dress up as Elvis impersonators; they decorate their homes with Elvis stuff. They support each other in their efforts to proudly proclaim the message of their King. With all that, you might assume that these fans are all alike, but that is a silly assumption.

I'll bet that if you scratched them, you'd find different political views underneath, different theological ideas, different thoughts on handling money, different ideas about what makes a family...but what colors all of that is their love of Elvis and their commitment to keep his message alive. A ha! There it is! The secret of tending to God's gift of unity – a commitment to keep the message alive – above all else. Less interest in making my point. More interest in hearing your story. Less interest in how I am served. More interest in how I can serve. Less interest in what I don't like, and more interest in how I can love. I need your attention because this is what I believe about us right here and right now. I am speaking as your pastor. We will never as a church live our God-given unity by convincing, arguing or even agreeing. We will do those things, but the only way we will ever be the answer to Jesus' prayer for us is by walking out these doors to serve – by making our collective priority to be one for the road - so that God looks down and says, "Wow, I never thought I'd see the day, but those Christians have left the building."

Jesus was smart, and I believe he knew that in order for us to be one, we'd have to put our attention on something other than ourselves. So, his prayer for unity is his strategy for getting his word out on the road – it is his hope that we will get moving – that we will be the one for the road. For the first time in a long time, I am feeling that happen with us. I felt it yesterday when so many of you showed up here to clean. I felt it a few weeks ago when you showed up to help out in the yards of two of our members. And, I've felt it in your enthusiasm as we talk about our summer meals program for the backpack buddies. Simple things, but if you are missing them, you are missing something that is making us stronger, something that is binding us together in a good way. We are learning how to decorate the home Jesus has in our hearts with the things that are important to him. We are learning how to sing the melody he composes deep down in our souls. We are learning how to be impersonators of Jesus – no sequins or hairpieces required. Sometime this week, find a quiet moment, ask yourself do you want to be a part of this today? Do you want to be one for the road? Then, come on! We're not talking in past tense anymore because this is the church where Jesus lives. He lives, baby. The King lives.