

## That They May Be One

In January of this year, in the closing days of his term, President Barack Obama joined a presidential tradition going back to George Washington, and delivered a farewell address to the nation. Actually giving a formal farewell speech is more the exception than the rule—only 8 presidents out of 45 have done it, 9 if you count Richard Nixon's announcement of his resignation. And most of them have come in the television age. The pattern, though, was set by Washington.

In his speech, often considered one of the greatest speeches in American history, Washington explained why it was time for him to go after two terms in office, even though there was no term limit for the president until the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment as adopted in 1947. But most of his address focused on the principles he believed should guide the new nation into its future—things like unity and patriotism, and neutrality in foreign affairs. He warned against partisanship and foreign influence in America's domestic politics.

Jesus' farewell message—actually more of a farewell conversation with his disciples, touches many of these same themes. He speaks about why it is necessary for him to go, and he lays down principles to guide his followers after his departure— most importantly his commandment to love one another as he

has loved them. He warns them of dangers that lie ahead, and he promises the gift of the Holy Spirit to see them through it all.

But since he's a preacher and not a president, he ends his message with prayer. In the opening verses of his prayer two interconnected things that stand out. The first is this: he prays, "Father ... glorify your Son, so that your Son may glorify you." In John, Jesus seems to talk in circles a lot, and it can take a little bit of careful reading to understand what he's saying. Here, we might ask, how does Jesus intend to glorify the Father? We should notice that he goes on to pray, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do"--and he says that that work is to give eternal life to those who believe in him -- and that the essence of eternal life is to know God.

So if we string all of this together, we could say that the thing God really longs for, the thing that brings God joy and satisfaction, isn't angels adoring him, or the sun and moon bowing down before him. The thing that God longs for is for us to fulfill our chief purpose as human beings—as we Presbyterians like to put it, "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." And in the days that followed Jesus' farewell message, through this death, and resurrection and ascension into heaven he made this all possible.

The second of our two interconnected pieces is to notice how personal and relational this all is. Jesus says to the Father, "All I have is yours, and you have is mine." But he also brings his followers into the picture. He prays for them "that they may be one, as we are one." And so one of the most important

things Christians can do in the world to bring glory to God is live in unity with one another. The work that Jesus did through the cross and resurrection isn't just about reconnecting people with God, it's just as much about reconnecting people with each other.

From the very beginning Christian faith has never been an individualistic thing. We talk about having a personal faith in Jesus, because no one can believe in Jesus for us, and no one can follow Jesus for us. But faith in him always connects us to a community, whether we acknowledge or practice it or not. And in a world as fractured and divided as ours there would be no greater reflection of God's power and glory than for those who claim the name of Jesus to do as he commanded, to love one another just as he loved us (John 13:34-35).

But sadly Christians have never been very good at it. The Book of Acts begins on a very strong note. Luke describes how in the days after Jesus ascended, the disciples were together, and, to translate it very literally, "they were devoted with one mind and purpose to prayer." And the portrait Luke paints of the church in the early chapters of Acts sounds almost too good to be true. But some rifts already begin to appear in chapter 6 of Acts, when the members of church who were from one ethnic group complain about being overlooked in the church's care. And the one of the big issues throughout the New Testament is whether or Gentiles could be included in the church—and if so on what terms. In Paul's letters that dispute leads to some of his most biting

words. And that's not the only threat to the church's unity. In 1 Corinthians Paul finds it necessary to condemn factions that were forming in the church around different leaders.

We've never been very good and living together. In the early centuries the fathers of the church tried to foster unity by making sure that all Christians believed and practiced the same things. They called together great ecumenical councils to find a way to speak with one voice on major questions as basic as "who is Jesus Christ?" But in the end, once they came to an agreement they were quick to condemn, and exclude, and ultimately go as far as executing those who didn't conform. But new rifts opened up anyhow. The Roman Church split from the Eastern Churches in the eleventh century. Protestant groups split off from the Roman Church beginning in the 1500s, and we've been splittling from each other ever since.

But why are we so bad at this? For one thing, even at our best, we live with some principles that can sometimes be in real tension with each other. Within our own Presbyterian tradition we ask all who enter our ordained office, to promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church. But when we try to uphold all three of these we can run into some real problems, especially in dealing with the "purity" part. We can't just dismiss it—what we believe and how we live matter! Somehow there has to be some way to be accountable to each other for that. But we struggle over how tight or loose the boundaries

should be. How much to do we need to agree with each other to worship and work together?

In our years in northern New York State, I was a member of a group called the Northern Tier Border Clergy. As the name suggests the members were pastors of churches in the small towns of Clinton County nearest the Canadian border. And in the decades before my arrival some of the pastors had labored long and hard to bring the clergy together in fellowship.

But there was an annual ritual in our region in which the Roman Catholic bishop would take out a full page ad in the local paper once a year denouncing the local Planned Parenthood organization. And every Catholic priest's name was included as a signer. Soon afterward, there was generally a counter-ad soon published in support of Planned Parenthood, and one year the name of a United Methodist pastor in our group was included on that ad.

This led to a rift in our clergy fellowship. And I found myself in the middle of it when my Methodist friend called and asked for help. After some conversation with an Episcopalian colleague we called a meeting to try to get everyone talking. But only one of our Catholic friends actually came to the meeting. Ultimatums were given and the fellowship was broken. It only resumed when that Methodist minister moved away.

Matters of belief separate us. And our internal Presbyterian history on this account is nothing to be proud of. Our struggles over human sexuality led in the early 2000s to a special task force on the "Peace, Unity, and Purity" of the

church. The conclusion of their multi-year work was that if we were to stay together we would have to find some way to be able to live together while we disagreed about same-sex marriage, and whether LGBT members could be ordained as elders and ministers, But once our denomination began to move in that direction—not to require anyone to do anything, but just to make space—hundreds of congregations around the country—including a few in our own Blackhawk Presbytery—decided that we could no longer live together as one and left.

But belief is only one piece of the puzzle. The church is as divided along lines of race, ethnicity, education, and income as much as by anything else. It seems that given the option we will gravitate toward folks who look and live and talk like we do.

But this unity thing seems to be a really high priority for Jesus. When you're praying your last prayer you tend to focus on the things that really matter to you. So is there any way forward?

We might want to conclude that all of our multiple churches—over 30 in just our small city—are a good thing. After all, each one can serve the needs of some particular niche in the community, each can be its own brand and serve its own customers. That may make life easier, but it doesn't answer Jesus' prayer. It really just reinforces all the human divisions that Jesus died to overcome.

So how might we move forward and be the answer to Jesus' prayer. To go back to the story of the rift in Northern NY, at that time the long-time pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Rouses Point had just retired and I was serving as their temporary moderator. One day I received a call from one of the elders, a woman named Sally, and I stopped in to see her. Thanksgiving was coming and every year for many years the pastors had organized a community service. But this year the pastors were feuding and it had been cancelled. But Sally had been talking with her friends around town and they had decided they would have a Thanksgiving service. The lay leaders would plan and lead the service. They would invite their pastors to participate, but the service would go on, pastors or not. She had called me to get some help putting together an order of worship—and the plan went ahead.

In the end, I think the way the church will live as one—at least in these times—isn't going to be about institutions but about people, especially lay people. It will happen as individual Christians work together in mission, as we share our faith experiences with each other and pray with and for each other. It happens as we intentionally move out of our boxes of comfort to be with people who aren't like us. It happens best apart from programs and grand visions—each one of us taking just one step at a time in the right direction.

We need to remember that in his farewell address Jesus didn't say, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you agree with one another,"

but “if you love one another.” And if we focus on that, we might just be the answer to Jesus’ prayer. Amen.

*Rev. David Spaulding  
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon  
May 28, 2017*