

## Why We Need to Embrace Unity – Chapter 3 - Rev. Joel Winckler

Hello, my name is Reverend Joel Winkler, and I'm the Northwest District superintendent in the Dakotas Conference. I'm very glad to share with you some thoughts based on this week's chapter on unity in the church. I begin with a humorous story that you may have heard:

A man was stranded on a deserted Pacific island for years. Finally, one day a boat comes sailing along into view and the man frantically waves and draws the skipper's attention. The boat comes near the island and the sailor gets out and greets the stranded man.

After a while, the sailor asks, "What are those three huts you have here?"

"Well, that's my house there."

"And what's the next hut," asked the sailor.

"I built that hut to be my church."

"What about the other hut?"

"Oh," he said, "that's where I used to go to church."

My, oh, my; unity. That's something we see so very little of lately. As our author states in the first line of this chapter, he says, "The Holy Spirit fosters unity, but unity is elusive." Now, that is an understatement. Is it no wonder then, that Jesus prays for unity?

Hear again from John 17:20-23, how passionate Jesus is in his prayer for all future disciples of him to live in unity with one another.

"I'm not praying only for them, but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. I've given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. I'm in them and you are in me, so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me, and that you have loved them just as you loved me."

Now, if we need more motivation for unity than what we find here in Jesus' prayer, we find it in abundance in the apostle Paul's writing. The theme of unity or harmony is so prevalent in his letters we almost miss it. Listen to what he says here to us again and again. From Romans 12:16 he says, live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people and don't think you know it all.

1 Corinthians 1:10 says, "I appeal to you dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.

2 Corinthians 13:11 says, "Dear brothers and sisters, I close my letter with these last words: Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you."

And then, in Ephesians 4:1-6, he says, "Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with

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each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all."

And then Philippians 2:2 says, "Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose."

Now, even in the Old Testament, there's a wonderful imagery of unity and harmony that we see in Psalm 1:33, and it's the first thing I thought of when I thought about unity. It says how wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in harmony. For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil that was poured over Aaron's head that ran down his beard and onto the border of his robe. Harmony is as refreshing as a dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion. And there the Lord has pronounced his blessing, even life everlasting.

It takes a lot to live in harmony. Just ask any married couple, they can tell you harmony and unity may be elusive, but so necessary. If we hope to impact our hurting and desperate world, the world doesn't need to hear from the church about another argument or disagreement. Can you imagine with me what folks might think if they see the church getting along with each other, truly living out a life of love, forgiveness, and care within the diversity and messiness of it all? It's not an easy task, but most certainly a necessary one if we want to impact the world we live in.

I like how our author states that God's mission requires a united church. The witness of both Jesus and Paul points to the missiological significance of unity. Jesus is explicit about it, praying not once but twice, that we might be perfectly one, so that the world will believe that you sent me. He then goes on to warn us of the consequences of disunity and separation puts our mission in serious jeopardy. Our partnership with God and God's mission hangs in the balance.

If we have nothing to offer the world other than a legacy of separation, alienation and division, then we have nothing to offer that the world has not already mastered. How true it is and how sad that our divisions have hindered God's work.

I still believe Jesus when he says in John 13:35, this is how everyone will know that you are my disciples when you love each other. In the United Methodist Church, we've been through a season of disaffiliation. It has been draining for everyone. What has caused me the most sadness and disappointment has been when some have acted without love for one another. It grieves my heart and it surely grieves the heart of Jesus. No church or denomination is perfect, but when its people act without love, it has forgotten the very core of who God is and who we are created to be in Christ Jesus.

The United Methodist Book of Worship contains several prayers for the church, and I invite you to join me as we pray this one on unity,

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“Oh God, the giver of life. We pray for the church throughout the world, sanctify its life, renew its worship, empower its witness, restore its unity. Remove from your people all pride in every prejudice that dulls their will for unity. Strengthen the work of all those who strive to seek that common obedience that will bind us together. Heal the divisions which separate your children from one another, that they may keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.”

Amen.