

Chris Murphy

April 14th, 2024

Scripture: John 17: 20-26

Sermon Title: Prayer for Church Unity

Prayer...

Introduction:

This last year I have served as the Leader for the pastor's group in town. Our original name was the Newberg Ministerial Association. We changed our name to Chehalem Valley Ministers this year. You may know that there are about 37 churches in our extended area around Newberg. We normally have about 25 ministers attend our gatherings. What I like about our lunches together is that it is a time to create community and to foster unity. The reasons we get together as ministers are twofold: first we need each other for relationship support. Only pastors really understand the journey of other pastors and so it helps to have each other to talk about the highs and lows of ministry. The other purpose for getting together is

our common mission to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We participate together in the family business of the healing and transformation of our world through the love of Christ. I am excited that God continues to do beautiful things through the churches in the Chehalem Valley area and beyond. Pretty soon many of our churches will come together to pray for our town at the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. Overall, I would say there is a growing spirit of unity in our community and churches are a part of that effort.

In our passage today, Jesus prays for unity for the future church. Earlier in John 17, Jesus prays for his disciples to be one with him and the Father. Then in our passage, Jesus prays for those who will believe in him through the word shared by the disciples. He prays that the future disciples, including you and me would be one. Jesus is praying for the future church. Jesus is praying that the future Christian Church will be one. And the reason Jesus wants the

church to be one is so that the world will know the love of God. The purpose of unity is love.

I know I tend to brag about my wife Karen a lot, but I need to do it again today because when I talk about church unity, I first think about my wife. Some of you know that Karen has a PhD in Historical Theology from Fuller Seminary. In addition to being a homeschool teacher for Chiara, a mom for Cate and Chiara, a friend to you and my best friend and spouse, Karen is a professor of church history and theology for both Fuller Seminary and Portland Seminary.

Karen's dissertation for her PhD was on the ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Pentecostals worldwide. Interestingly, the two largest groups of churches and the fastest growing groups of churches in the world are either Catholic or Pentecostal.

One of the great highlights of both of our lives involved going together to Rome Italy as guests of the Vatican in 2011. Karen was invited to be an observer for an ecumenical dialogue between

representatives from both the Catholic church and Pentecostal churches. Karen was invited by her faculty mentor Mel Roebeck to participate in this dialogue and I tagged along as a guest of the group. What was amazing about this trip is that Karen and I firsthand saw the amazing history of the early church. We saw the location where Paul and Peter faced persecution in Rome. We saw the beauty of the Sistine Chapel and Saint Peter's Cathedral. We also witnessed Karen's mentor Mel meeting Pope Benedict. It was awesome and now I am remembering our trip to Rome because Jen Henry's daughter Megan Henry is posting beautiful pictures of Rome every day. (Reflect on the hospitality of the leaders of the Catholic Church. We were viewed as the grandchildren being welcomed home. One thing Catholics teach is the value of ecumenical dialogue).

Karen's dissertation was published into a book entitled, Pentecostals and Catholics On Becoming A Christian. In her book,

she writes about the values associated with ecumenical dialogue.

She shares,

“Dialogue necessitates honesty, humility, openness, willingness to listen, and mutuality if both parties are to leave transformed by the encounter. The truth is that "we really do need the other, and we all suffer because of our unwillingness to admit that simple fact. In the words of Pope Francis, "it is beautiful....to find in other Christians something we need, something that we could receive like a gift from other brothers and sisters." Ecumenical dialogue is valuable for recognizing the limitations of one's own theologizing and faith practices as it seeks comprehension of the other's theological insights, spirituality, and faith practices.

Dialogue also often recognizes the need for repentance and forgiveness from those who have experienced persecution, injustice, or oppression at the hands of the other. P. 55 and 56 (Pentecostals and Catholics On Becoming A Christian.

In our town of Newberg, we value ecumenical dialogue between different churches because we need each other. We can learn from one another and then more effectively share the love of Jesus in our world.

Remember again, everything for Jesus ultimately is about love. Jesus prays for his disciples and the future church to be protected from the enemy and to show effectively God's love. Jesus says something beautiful about love. He says that as we are one with him, we will be one with the Father. "I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one." The picture is of followers of Jesus joining hands with the Holy Trinity and then empowered by God our Mother/Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit we go into the world to show God's love.

It is a beautiful spiritual mystery how the Church becomes one with God. To me it involves both enjoying the love of God in our worship and community and then allowing the joy of this love to flow out into

the world around us. The way this unity is shown is through ministries of compassion. Newberg shows compassion in so many ways. One is through Love Inc that works with churches to provide food, bikes, clothing, classes, and other services to people who have lower incomes. Northside church hosts the Emergency Shelter in town which helps provide shelter but also support moving houseless people into permanent housing. Unity fosters tangible expressions of love.

I know that churches and different denominations historically have sometimes shown more disagreement than agreement. Sometimes the church does not feel unified. Sometimes certain denominations or certain churches pretend they are superior to other denominations or groups. Historically, we have even seen wars fought over Christian beliefs or due to other forms of religious conflict.

Jesus weeps over the church when we choose division rather than unity. One thing I have learned through my wife's work as an ecumenist and through our history with Christian colleges and seminaries is that the diversity of the church denominationally and otherwise is actually beautiful. The church is also blessed by different ethnic and cultural styles. Rather than seeing diversity as a threat to unity, we as the church are called to see our diversity as a blessing and an expression of the diversity of God. We are all made in the image of God.

I understand that some churches have failed to be open to the inclusion of women and of members of the LGBTQ plus community. Some churches are also less kind to people of other religions and have supported racism. And I am proud that the Presbyterian Church USA is more welcoming and inclusive than some churches. I know it might be attractive to only associate with churches that are like us theologically or have similar social values. However, I think it

is important to work for unity in the church. Unity does not mean being passive about social concerns. We need to speak up over topics like empowerment of female preachers and inclusion of all people, but we also need to stay in relationship with churches who may still be needing to grow in certain areas of perspective. Part of my journey of being a more inclusive and hopefully kind person has happened with the help of Christians who stretched my theology and perspectives and helped me open up to new ideas.

As a preacher, I come back again to this profound truth that Jesus prayed for church unity so that the world may know God's love. May God give us the grace to seek unity with all Christians and may we work together to live more faithfully the Gospel.

This morning we are talking about unity in the wider Church, but I also wish to take a moment to remind you that I am going on a sabbatical this summer. I shared this in our congregational meeting at the end of January and our session leadership approved my

sabbatical a number of months ago. I should also share the Presbytery of the Cascades here in Oregon strongly recommends sabbaticals every six years for PCUSA pastors, so that is another reason I will be taking a break this summer.

What this practically means is that I will be away from church from June 1st to Sept. 1st. I will be using my sabbatical to connect more to God, myself, my family, friends, and mentors who can help me relax and experience restoration. While I am gone, Lish Mannerter will serve as our Worship Coordinator and Mary Kalesse will service as our Congregational Care leader. Both of them have experience working as ministers of other churches. I will talk a little more about the specifics of my sabbatical and the plan for church leadership support when I preach more in May, but this morning I want to highlight one thing.

During my sabbatical my prayer is that are church will be united in love for one another and our common mission for Newberg and

beyond. I am trusting that all of you will step up and support each other, maybe even in new ways as I take a few months for rest and restoration. It will be hard for me to be away, but I sense in my spirit that my sabbatical will not only be a gift to me, but it will be a gift for our church to grow in new ways as a united family.

Please pray with me...

John 17:20-26

20 “I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,[a] so that

the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 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. 24 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.

25 “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 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.”