

One Church

John 17:20-26, selected text from the Revised Common Lectionary

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When people tell us that they are Catholic, we have a pretty good idea what that means. We may not know the finer details of Roman Catholic theology, but we have a general idea about what Catholics believe. If somebody is a Southern Baptist, we have a pretty good idea as to what that is all about. The same goes for Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans and Episcopalians. We know the Amish do not use electricity, they wear distinctive clothing, and they ride in buggies.

But not many people know what is distinctive about Community Churches because we are not a very big fellowship of churches and are therefore not too well known. Perhaps someone has inquired as to your church membership. When you told them you belonged to a community church, did they get a quizzical look on their face and ask, "What are Community Churches like? What do they believe?" Have you ever felt at a loss for words to describe how we might be like other churches and how we might be distinctive?

In the New Testament we read: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." (I Peter 3:15). Allow me to help you be prepared to give an answer the next time someone asks you about the family of faith to which you belong. The key to that answer is in the word "Community." You will notice that on the front of our bulletin, under "The Church in Aurora," we read in parenthesis (Community). On the back of our bulletin is a statement that explains what that means: "A member church of the International Council of Community Churches."

Okay that still begs the question, "What are Community Churches?" A further statement defines the International Council of Community Churches, to wit: "A fellowship of ecumenically-minded, freedom-loving churches cooperating in fulfilling the mission of the Church in the World." One of the definitions for ecumenical in the dictionary is: "Concerned with establishing or promoting unity among churches or religions."

The word "community" pretty much sums up what is distinctive about Community Churches. The distinctive thing about Community Churches is that they emphasize the *common unity* of all believers. What do we all have in common? We are all God's children, for starters. There is one God and Father of us all; and, like most parents, it drives God nuts when his children fuss and fight with one another. So when people ask you what Community Churches are all about, just say they are big on promoting Christian Unity. Otherwise they are pretty much like other mainline Protestant Churches such as Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans and so forth.

The biggest and broadest ecumenical organization in America is the National Council of Churches. Guess who the current President is. Our own Michael Livingston, the

Executive Director of the International Council of Community Churches. Guess who is a voting delegate to the annual General Board meeting of the same organization? Me! I get to schmooze with all sorts of big wigs because Community Churches are involved on the ecumenical scene all out of proportion to our diminutive size.

Last week we announced the untimely passing of Rev. Jeff Newhall, the immediate past Executive Director of the International Council of Community Churches. He was also a leader in a movement called “Churches Uniting in Christ” and will soon be recognized in the national press as a great ecumenist—a great proponent of Christian Unity in particular and religious unity in general. I can hardly think of a more needful message in this age of religiously fueled hatred.

Our text assigned for this morning by the Revised Common Lectionary is the most often quoted text in the Community Church Movement. That is because it provides the clearest biblical foundation for Christian Unity. It is not the only text to provide such a foundation, to be sure. But it is the preeminent text used in our literature and alluded to time and again in Community Church circles. Although the message has been preached upon many times by Community Church ministers, it has not been “preached out.”

The title of our message for today is “One Church.” That happens to be the actual name of a church in Arizona pastored by a gentleman friend of Hannah Horak. I like the name of that church. It may not be a member church of the International Council of Community Churches, but it has a name any community church could be proud of: “One Church.” One church among many. One body of Christ made up of many member/parts. One in spirit. One for all and all for one. I like it. That, we will see, is the kind of church for which Christ prayed.

Our text is part of a larger prayer that Jesus is offering just prior to his arrest and trial and crucifixion. In fact, our text is comprised of the very last words of Jesus before his arrest occurred. I would say that this parting prayerful message is climactic to say the least. First Jesus prays for himself, and then he prays for his disciples. In our text Jesus continues: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” (Verse 20). That would include you and me and all who have come to believe through the Gospel witness.

And for what does Jesus pray? “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” (Verse 21). Jesus prays that believers will be one with each other just like he and the Father are one. How are he and the Father one? Paul writes: “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.” (Hebrews 1:3). And again, “He is the image of the invisible God.” (Colossians 1:15) Like father, like son. To know one is to know the other. If we want to see what God is like in human form, look at Jesus. In this way the Father and Son are one.

Just as Jesus is a reflection of God, so the Church is a reflection of Jesus. Indeed, the Church is the body of Christ on earth—his continuing physical presence on earth and his continuing ministry on earth. Jesus naturally wants the Church to be a good reflection on

him and not a bad one, just as we want our children to be a good reflection on us. If our children are contentious, abrasive and rude, that is not a very good reflection on us as parents. In the same way, if believers who take the name of Jesus are contentious, abrasive and rude, that is not a very good reflection on Jesus.

Mahatma Gandhi is regarded as the father of the Indian nation. His writings have influenced great religious leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. When Gandhi was young, he was disheartened by his country's caste system that was supported by his Hindu faith tradition. While visiting South Africa he became impressed with Christianity as a religious alternative that promised hope for overcoming such unfair and hurtful social barriers.

One Sunday, hoping to approach the minister about receiving instruction in the Christian faith, he went to attend services at a Christian church. But the ushers at the service refused him a seat because of his dark skin. They asked him, "Why don't you visit the colored peoples' church?" Gandhi never became a Christian. "If Christians also have differences, I might as well remain a Hindu," he explained. The divisiveness of that Christian Church in South Africa was a bad reflection on Jesus Christ.

This is why Jesus prays, "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (Verse 21). Who is going to believe that Jesus has anything to do with God if the people who bear his name, and the church that bears his name, behave in such hurtful and hateful ways? Who wants to attend a church where people are fussing and fighting all the time? Who has time for that kind of stress? There is enough stress like that in the world without having to go to church to find more.

When there is painful division in the Church, whether we are talking about divisions in the local church or divisions among the denominations that make up "the larger church," there is something wrong with that picture. If we are all God's children and God loves us with a perfect love, then you know he wants us to love one another. Not to love God's other children is tantamount to saying, "God does not love you, and neither do I." But this is not the message Jesus is trying to get across. Again he prays, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (Verse 23).

This prayerful plea is Jesus parting message just before his arrest and crucifixion. It is his dying wish for those who will follow after him. Community Churches believe in honoring Jesus' final wish. Community Churches believe in One Church—not one institutional church, but many institutional churches that are one in spirit. Two of our favorite slogans are "Unity Without Uniformity," and, "Diversity Without Divisiveness." We do not always achieve it, but it is the ideal toward which we strive, and it explains a lot about how we operate.

So when Father Joe Witmer of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Aurora celebrated the fortieth anniversary of his ordination yesterday, Nancy and I were at the dinner

reception representing The Church in Aurora. As an amazing coincidence, Father Joe's commitment to ecumenism (Christian unity) is emphasized in his commemorative bulletin together with the words of our text for this morning: "that all may be one, as the Father and I are one."

When the Aurora United Methodist Church celebrates its fiftieth anniversary today, their members will find a page in their commemorative booklet provided by The Church in Aurora that will read: "The congregation, leadership and staff of The Church in Aurora celebrates with The Aurora United Methodist Church on the occasion of 50 years of faithful service to our community and world. May the next 50 years and beyond find us laboring side-by-side in the fields of the Lord that have been our common portion."

In these and many other ways we promote unity in the community—the local community, the church community and the world community. When folks ask you what the Community Church is about just tell them that the term "Community" says it all—*common unity*. We seek to embody the Christian unity for which our Lord prayed. Otherwise, we are like any other family of faith. And when people ask you about our funny name, just tell them that The Church in Aurora is not the only church in Aurora. It is one church among many. It is one in spirit with all believers, regardless of denominational affiliation. And just like "The Larger Church," it is one body of believers made up of many different parts because, as the hymn says, "Our God has made us one."