Unity Gives Us Power
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1 Corinthians 1:10 and John 17:20-26
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I was listening to the news the other day when I heard the term Christian Unity bantered about and I wondered exactly what that meant. I guess it conjures up thoughts of all Christians holding hands and singing Kumbaya - Did you ever wonder what language that is? So here is your fun fact for today: "Kumbaya, my Lord" was first recorded by an out-of-work English professor, Robert Winslow Gordon, in 1927. Gordon went on a search for black spirituals and recorded a song "Come by Here, My Lord", sung by H. Wylie. The song was sung in Gullah on the islands of South Carolina between Charleston and Beaufort. Gullah is the creole language featured in the Uncle Remus series of Joel Chandler Harris and the Walt Disney production of Song of the South. "Come by here, my Lord" in Gullah is "Kum by (h)yuh, my lawd". Hyuh almost sounds like a Maine "here".

Now if there is anything we Christians know, it is that we are not all of the same mindset, hence the many denominations and different ways we worship and even interpret the bible. Often, we are not all in agreement even within our own churches! The one thing that binds all Christians is our deep love and respect for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who died for our sins – He died for all of us.

In one of his daily devotionals titled, "Why is Christian Unity so important? " Dr. Charles Stanley says, Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 1:10–17) in a letter to the divided body of Corinthian believers. The church was allowing a disagreement to hinder their fellowship. Paul knew the steep danger of dissension among believers.

Scripture is clear about the church's mission. Some of its highest goals include sharing the gospel with all nations, caring for those in need, and worshiping together, along with loving, encouraging, and admonishing one another in God's truth. None of these is fully possible if a church is divided, whether physically or mentally.

God wants His people to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3, NIV). So if all Christians base their beliefs on the Bible, they should be able to settle every argument according to its truth, right? Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Our human nature, preferences, and different interpretations of Scripture can cause disagreements. Consider, for example, how many churches have experienced strife over music styles.

Tragically, when differences are divisive, our mission becomes blurred and we are ineffective. Just as fishermen cannot catch fish with a broken net, we are unable to effectively share Jesus with the world when our fellowship is not intact....

Are your actions and words strengthening your fellow Christians? Or do you gossip, express negativity, and push your own preferences and opinions? Be careful. God has mandated that our conduct positively impact the church's unity. This is essential if we are to accomplish His purpose.

None of this is possible if a church is divided or in turmoil. In Ephesians 4: 1-6 we hear, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Paul was focusing on unity within the local body of Christ – this while the church was still new but Paul understood the importance of this. Today, it is more important than ever for the worldwide body of believers, which is approximately 1/3 of the world's population to move toward this goal. Yes, as I said earlier, we are diverse in many ways: culture, worship practices, church organizations BUT we all confess Jesus as both Lord and the Way of salvation.

In today's gospel, Jesus prays the prayer for the whole church, for the unity of all Christians. Jesus prays that all Christians might be united in love in the same way he is united in love with us and the God the Father. In verses 20 and 21, Jesus says,

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 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." Christians cannot show that if we cannot get our act together. How will the world see the true value of Christian faith if we lack unity?

Jesus is so clear in his meaning when he exclaims,

"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."

"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

And what do we need to do? Love God and love each other!! We must work through differences and issues together and focus on our common beliefs. We sing, "They will know we are Christians by our love", but do we practice that? Do we refrain from judging each other? Do we take the time to try and understand each other's point of view?

Well apparently in one church, the disagreements were so bad, it led the pastor to take matters in to his own hands. He devised a plan to unify his church however, it led to his arrest!

Former pastor Eric Daniel Harris, 37, pled guilty to the November 1996 arson that burned down the Kentucky Missionary Baptist Church in Saline County, Arkansas. According to a federal prosecutor, Harris said he did it because "there was a division among church members, and they needed a project to unify them." – I do not believe that is what Jesus had in mind and my guess is the congregation was unified in its decision to replace the pastor!

Jesus said in John 13:35: "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." What kind of love was he talking about?

We all know the reading that is frequently heard at weddings:

(1 Corinthians 13:4-13)

- Love is patient, love is kind.
- It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
- It does not dishonor others,
- it is not self-seeking,
- it is not easily angered,
- it keeps no record of wrongs.
- Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
- It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
- Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.
- When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I think we have all heard the phrase, "United We Stand, Divided We Fall". In fact for those baby boomers, in 1970 Cher recorded a song with that title and the lyrics are: "*For united we stand. Divided we fall*
And if our backs should ever be against the wall
We'll be together, Together, you and I"

A similar phrase also appears in the biblical New Testament – translated into English from the historic Greek in Mark 3:25 as "And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand". Similar verses of the New Testament include Matthew 12:25 "Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand."

The only way we as Christians can show the world the true value of Christian faith is show our unity of love with our fellow human beings, which is the answer to Jesus' prayer. This strong Christian love and unity will accomplish so much more if we are truly together – not just one person, one congregation not just one denomination.

Since the Church is Christ's body in the world, the Church is now the instrument for uniting all with one another and ultimately with God. That same Incarnate God, Jesus Christ, is still at work today helping us to maintain the bond of peace. He accomplishes this work of unification through the active ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, called the soul of the Church by many, animates the visible body of Christ to bring Christ's disciples together and to urge them on to greater unity.

In the light of these central truths, what is our responsibility as members of Christ's Body, the Church, in promoting Christian unity? How can we be part of this – our little church in Sagamore Beach? On the eve of Christmas 2015, a review of over 174,000 interviews conducted during that year showed that three-quarters of American adults identify with a Christian religion – that is 75% of 320 million people so how can we help unify 240 Million Christians??

It would be easy to say there is no way. We need to focus on our own church and maintain our Christian love and unity. But ultimately the practical work of unity must be engaged. What is that practical work? Contrary to our instincts to roll up our sleeves and DO something, the most practical thing we can do is to pray for unity. Remember that unity is a gift but God usually gives His gifts only to those who ask (Mt 7:7-11) and especially to those who beg unceasingly (cf. Lk 18:1-18). Divine unity will only be achieved through the outpouring of God into the Church. That is the most practical thing we can do. Amen