

“That We All May Be One”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

May 29, 2022

20“I ask not only on behalf of these [disciples], but also on behalf of those who will 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, 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.” (John 17:20-26)

Let me just say that this is not a great week to stand up here and start a sermon with the title “That We All May Be One.” Russia is at war with Ukraine, but the divide is worldwide. Tragic mass shootings in Buffalo, Southern California, and Texas have once again revealed the tectonic fault line that runs through America on the subject of guns, as if the union wasn’t already quaking enough with the recent news about Roe v. Wade. It’s all enough to make the storm over climate change seem like a gentle summer rain, if it weren’t for the fact that we’ll all be underwater in a few decades if we don’t find a way to bridge that political divide. From our current vantage point, it seems almost laughable, this prayer of Jesus that we “*may all be one.*”

And yet it is clear that this is a central goal of Jesus – one of his top priorities as the head of the church. As he prays, he is thinking not just about the current generation of disciples, but also those that will follow. Christ wants to draw all of those generations to himself, so that the church will all be one flock hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd. And the prayer quickly turns into a promise. “I have made your name known to them,” he prays, “and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them” ... “so that they may all be one.”

As Jesus often did, I want to explore the meaning of that phrase through the lens of a parable. What I am about to tell you is a real-life story, but I think it teaches like a parable, because it is both familiar and strange. It feels consistent with what we know, but it also has a way of turning our expectations upside down. Let’s call it the “Parable of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Report.”

Our story begins in 2001, when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. approved the formation of a “Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church.” The name comes from one of the vows that all ministers and officers of the church make at our ordinations: the promise that in our work we will “further the peace, unity, and purity of the church.” The sense was that, on the whole, we were not doing a very good job of this in the church. If there was peace, it was an uneasy and tenuous one, because theological differences over scripture, gender, and sexuality were ripping churches and presbyteries apart. We could not agree on what “purity” looked like, and “unity” was



nowhere to be found. So, the GA did a very Presbyterian thing and chose a committee. They gathered twenty people – people of strong faith, strong commitment to the church, and strong views on the issues that were dividing us, to lead the entire denomination in a period of “spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century.” It was a sweeping, nebulous, and intimidating assignment.

And that is why one of my seminary professors, Frances Taylor Gench, didn’t want any part of it. As a highly respected biblical scholar, a cradle Presbyterian with a progressive mind, and an outspoken advocate of openness and welcome in the church, she was a natural choice. “I was not at all sure that I wanted to be drafted,” she said.¹ While everyone agreed that the twenty names were great choices, almost everyone asked the same question: “How will they ever get along?” By design, this group represented some of the strongest voices in the most passionate debates in the church. As my professor wrote, this was a group of people who “under ordinary circumstances never would have dreamed of hanging out together.” It was a West Side Story gang fight waiting to happen, and she didn’t want to do it. But friends and allies urged her to accept the invitation. They wanted her to get in there and fight for the causes they believed in. She eventually said yes for that very reason. “This was going to be my opportunity,” she wrote, “to set some very misguided Presbyterians straight.” In other words, she was gonna get right into the fight and let ‘em have it, you know, for Jesus.

The group issued its report to the General Assembly five years later in 2006. People can and have argued about the theological impact it had. Personally, I’m not sure it changed much on the issues of scriptural interpretation, sexuality, ordination. Most of the churches that were discussing leaving the denomination before the report did end up leaving. But I would say there was at least one groundbreaking impact of that report, and it had to do with what it means for us all to “be one.”

As she reflected on her time in the task force, one of the things Frances Taylor Gench realized is that, in her words, “church conflicts are always ‘family feuds.’” I think I know what she means by that. What I think she means is that the church, when we are being the church correctly, is not like the TV show “Survivor.” When we have squabbles and debates in the church, the goal is not to be the last one standing when the fight is over. The end is not just to “Outwit, Outplay, and Outlast,” because no one really wins in those scenarios. Sure, some self-righteous punches will land, but both sides will get their licks in. Everyone will be bruised in some way, and by the end of the fight, everyone is bleeding and hurting.

No, life in the church of Jesus Christ is more like the gameshow “Family Feud.” Like every family, we are going to have our squabbles, disputes, and challenges. We will have difficult choices where emotions are high. But regardless of what happens, win or lose, we are still a family. As members of Jesus’ flock, we are bound together for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, even when Cousin Gertrude gives Steve Harvey (or, if you are a bit older, Richard Dawson) the stupidest answer – one guaranteed to be followed by “Survey says... EEEEEEEH.” When the Church family leaves the studio, whatever happened in the feud, they are still a family.

The difference could not be more important. In the end, that assumption that we are in relationship makes all the difference. I had a class with Frances shortly after the five

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Faithful Disagreement: Wrestling with Scripture in the Midst of Church Conflict* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009). p. xi.

years she spent with the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity, and I distinctly remember her telling our class two things she knew for sure after her experience. **Number one:** no one on that panel changed their opinion about the key issues they faced. Truth be told, they probably held them even more strongly because they had been distilled in the crucible of passionate discussion and honest exchange. As the report itself said, "We have not compromised our basic convictions or commitments. We still hold most of the views and perspectives we brought to the task force."²

But the second thing she said lies at the heart of this sermon. The second thing she knew for sure is that she had grown to love those nineteen other people in a way she never could have predicted. Even as they disagreed, she saw their faith, she saw their pain, and she saw their joys. She listened to their passion with humility and a desire to understand. And, in the end, they all realized that in the process they had become family. I remember the exact words she used. She said, "I knew I wanted to be in the church with them."

A similar experience was shared by two historical figures in the American church. George Whitfield and John Wesley met at Oxford in the 1720's. Whitfield went on to be a prominent Presbyterian preacher, while Wesley laid the foundations for the Methodist church in America. From the very beginning, the two students disagreed passionately on the subject of predestination and free will. The Calvinist Whitfield believed the supreme, omnipotent God controlled everything, that the events of history were already laid out completely in the mind of God. Wesley said that was "blasphemy," that predestination was a "monstrous doctrine." They fired letter after letter back and forth at one another, each arguing why one was right and the other was wrong. Many of these letters survive, and they are amazingly rich theological documents.

But here is the thing: at the end of the day, neither man changed his position or beliefs. If anything, they probably ended up holding them even more strongly. But as hard as they fought, they never lost the friendship they forged at Oxford. In fact, the brotherly love that existed between them only became deeper over time.

One day, one of Whitfield's congregants, who obviously thought very little of John Wesley, quipped to Whitfield, "Well, we won't be seeing John Wesley in heaven, will we?" He figured it would elicit an acerbic nod or laugh from his preacher.

All that Whitfield said was, "Yes, you're right, we won't see him in heaven. He will be so close to the Throne of God and we will be so far away, we won't be able to see him."³

When Whitfield died, it was obvious that the love and affection was mutual. John Wesley preached no less than three memorial services for his old college friend. In each, he glowingly praised Whitfield's zeal from the pulpit, his boundless energy, "his tender-heartedness to the afflicted," and his Christian charity to the poor. But Wesley saved the deepest praise for Whitfield's strength as a brother in Christ. "Should we not mention," he told the mourners, "that he had a heart susceptible of the most generous and the most tender *friendship*? I have frequently thought that this, of all others, was the distinguishing

² "Final Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church,"

https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/peace-unity-purity-final-report-revised-english.pdf

³ <http://www.tonycooke.org/articles-by-tony-cooke/wesley-whitfield/#sthash.BFZmrbvJ.dpuf>

part of his character. How few have we known of so kind a temper, of such large and flowing affections! ... Can anything but love beget love?"⁴

Even though they passionately disagreed over doctrine, these two men started out as brothers and they never lost that bond. With regard to their passionate debates over theology, Wesley would say only that there are some Christian doctrines that are simply not essential. "In these," Wesley said, "we may think and let think; we may agree to disagree."⁵

As Jesus continues to pray that we "may all be one," it does not mean that we all have to agree on everything, or that we have to give up the things we believe, or even that we need to be less passionate about them. It *does* mean that we have to remember that, in the end, we are family. Especially in the church. Frances Taylor Gench said it this way: "[Jesus] does not pray that we might all be the same, but that we might all be one, despite the differences that divide us, because the quality of our life together... is our most convincing witness to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim."⁶ In other words, if we in the church can commit ourselves to disagreeing agreeably that might just be the greatest gift we can give to the world.

As we strain under the weight of thorny issues that are painful and difficult to engage, we need to remember that Jesus does not pray that we would all be the same. Jesus wants us to be one in him. Jesus wants us to remember that what holds us together is the bond of Christ... that we are all part of the same body and branches on the same vine. So, as we engage difficult questions about gun control, reproductive rights, climate change, and COVID response, as we enter into the feuds that we will inevitably have, perhaps we would be wise to adopt some of the practices used by the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity: that we will be ourselves and say what we think, but we will speak that truth in love and humility; that we will listen to each other with respect; that we will be quick to listen and slow to accuse; that we will carry out our work among this community of believers, showing faithfulness in our relationships, and trusting each other's motivations and dedication; that we will model a respectful, loving process of discernment and dialogue, seeking to reach consensus whenever possible, ever mindful of our responsibilities to all the members of our beloved Church. And we will pledge to remember that, no matter what we may be feuding about, we remain a family. It may be the best witness that we could give the world.

And as we seek to live into this model, may we be encouraged not only by the prayer of Jesus, but his enduring promise to the living God to give us the love that "*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*" "I have made your name known to them," Jesus says to God, "and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them" ... "so that they may all be one."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ Wesley, John. "Death of George Whitefield," Preached at the Chapel in Tottenham-Court Road and at the Tabernacle, near Moorfields, on Sunday, November 18, 1770. <http://www.piney.com/WhitefSer54Funeral.html>

⁵ <http://www.tonycooke.org/articles-by-tony-cooke/wesley-whitfield/#sthash.BFZmrbvJ.dpuf>

⁶ Gench, Frances Taylor. *Faithful Disagreement*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox (2009), pp. 14-5.