

“One” (John 17:20-26)

Easter 7, May 16, 2010

It's not unusual to hear sermons about Jesus answering *our* prayer, but today I would like to talk about the reverse: how we can answer Jesus' prayer. And what prayer is that? The one in our text, where Jesus prays that we may “**all be one.**”

Now, that doesn't sound like too big a request, does it? For us to “**all be one.**” In fact, it sounds rather reasonable. I mean, who isn't for Christian unity? And who isn't against disunity? So if that is what Jesus wants, why not grant His prayer? Why not “**all be one**”?

Of course, it's not quite that easy. Unity doesn't just happen. Like unity in a family or unity on a team, Christian unity takes work. There are negative things we must not do – or must stop doing. There are positive things we must do and continue doing. Unity grows through specific choices by specific people in specific situations. So does disunity. So if we're serious about answering Jesus' prayer, we need to pay attention to specifics.

Just to illustrate, think about the last time you went through security at the airport. It's never a pleasant experience, but even so, it can be made worse than it needs to be. All it takes are specific choices by specific people in that specific situation. Like the guy who doesn't see why he should have to take off his shoes, which means that when he goes through the scanner, the beeper goes off, so then he does take off his shoes and goes through again – slowing down the line. Or like the woman who puts her baggage through the scanner and – lo and behold! – she has liquid items stuffed away that are not in a quart-size baggy. “I didn't know!” she claims – even though there are signs all over the place. So the while attendant goes looking for a spare baggy, she rummages around for the liquid items – and that slows down the line. You see what I mean? Specific choices by specific people in that specific situation. And let's not forget the guy who didn't come an hour early but cut it as close as he could and then complains about how long the process is taking. Or the guy who's got the iPod blasting in his ear and is oblivious to everything else. Or...well actually, this was kind of funny. Last March, there were two elderly women ahead of me talking rather loudly about these new-fangled scanner machines. “*And they show everything! Everything! Can you imagine?! Well, if they think...*” And so it went, until a young woman ahead of them politely explained they didn't have that kind of scanner here. And did the two of them thank her for the information? No. They just glared at her, as if to say: *Um, excuse us, but we're gossiping here! And we'll get upset over absurd rumors if we want to!* Fortunately, most passengers aren't like that. The vast majority are patient, cooperative, and responsible. But it only takes a few, doesn't it? A few specific people doing a few specific things to make that specific situation worse than it needs to be.

That's also true for families. That's also true for teams. That's also true for congregations like ours. And the first step toward building unity is recognizing

this. Everyone is for unity...in theory. The devil's in the details – specific choices by specific people in specific situations! That's why we need to pay attention to specifics – each of us individually. We cannot control what others do, but we can control what we do – and this is what we must do if we're serious about answering Jesus' prayer that we may **“all be one.”**

To help us make the kind of choices that build unity, I'd like to reflect on two key principles that are always worth keeping in mind:

1. *I am responsible for my own well-being.*
2. *I am responsible for my congregation's well-being.*

Now, this first one may sound a bit strange, even a bit selfish – *“I am responsible for my own well-being”* – but actually, it's both healthy and helpful. The point is that if I need something, want something, or am upset about something, I shouldn't just expect others to figure that out. I need to take the bull by the horns. I need to speak up. I am responsible for my own well-being.

This, by the way, is something I tell couples before they get married. If you're not happy about something, don't just expect your spouse to figure it out: *“If you really loved me, you would know what's wrong!”* Be a grown-up! Be proactive! Say something! Pick the right time, of course, and the right place, but say something: *I'd like more help around the house. I'd like to go out more often. I'd like more back-up dealing with the kids.* And if your spouse seems out of sorts, don't assume you know what it is. Ask! Or if your feelings get hurt, don't just brood about it. Bring it up! Who knows? It may be a misunderstanding. Or it may be your spouse is dealing with more than you realized. And even if there is no innocent explanation, this may be what it takes to get things moving in a better direction – which I guarantee you, brooding will not accomplish! At any rate, I tell them: if you're not happy about something, don't just expect your spouse to figure it out. A good marriage takes work. This is part of it – bringing things up; being proactive. You are responsible for your own well-being.

And the same is true when you're part of a church. No church wants to neglect its members. No pastor wants people's needs to go unmet. Unfortunately, there is no way we can just know everything that's going on in everyone's life, much less figure out what to do about it. Yet sometimes that's the expectation, isn't it? Instead of picking up the phone and saying, “I'd like a visit,” some just assume no one cares. Instead of finding out whether such and such a rumor is true, some just assume the worst. Instead of taking the bull by the horns, some just slip away without even trying to work things through. And that undermines unity.

Case in point: the other day I got a message on Facebook from a member of my former congregation. She wrote that Easter was the first time she had been to church in years. And why had she stayed away? When she got divorced, a member there took it upon herself to say – on behalf of the congregation – that this woman was no longer welcome. Then, adding insult to injury, she stopped getting the newsletter; it went to her ex-husband instead. She was so, so hurt!

She thought: *How can my congregation be so unloving?!* But she just left it at that. Now, this probably happened around the time I moved up here. At any rate, I knew nothing about it and thus could do nothing about it – which I would have if I had known. But can you imagine? I have been *here* thirteen years. This hurt has been festering for at least thirteen years! And it would have been relatively simple to deal with. I mean, telling a divorced person they're not welcome – that's so out of line, and it would have been nipped in the bud! Plus maybe, just maybe, it might have been possible to offer this woman support while she went through that difficult time. But it wasn't possible, because no one else knew. If only she had said something! If only, if only, if only! And I wonder how many other people have gone through the same kind of thing!

Now, please don't get me wrong. I'm not judging anyone, believe me! To the contrary! But you see why this principle is so important for Christian unity: *I am responsible for my own well-being.* I realize not all of us are comfortable saying what we need, raising questions, or checking assumptions. But is there another healthy alternative? Not that I know of. So think of this as part of the growth process. Better yet, think of it as a sacrifice we make for Jesus to answer His prayer that we may “**all be one.**” To strengthen our unity, each of us must take this principle to heart: *I am responsible for my own well-being.*

That said, we do need to balance this principle with a second one: *I am responsible for my congregation's well-being* – that is, responsible for the well-being of individual members; responsible for the well-being of the congregation as a whole. Like with a family or with a team, there is no room for a “*customer mentality.*” We're all in this together. We all have our role. The object is “**not to be served but to serve.**” And like with a family or with a team, there are clear benefits when everyone looks out for everyone else. Needs get met – and we're all the better for it! This, too, strengthens unity! The key word, of course, is “*everyone*” – everyone taking responsibility for everyone else. And not just in theory. Here most of all, we need to pay attention to specifics: our specific choices caring for specific people in specific situations.

And what does that look like? Here's one example. Last December, a few members realized that with two less pastors on staff our shut-ins weren't getting regular visits. So they thought: *Why does it have to be a pastor who visits?* And they came up with a plan. “Let's get a few groups of carolers together, and we'll go visit these people. We can even bring them their *God Sightings Devotional Bible*” – which is exactly what they did. And boy, was it appreciated! Our shut-in members were so pleased! And the folks who went caroling enjoyed it, too! So you see what I mean about there being mutual benefits. And all because they took this principle to heart: *I am responsible for my congregation's well-being.*

Here is another example. A while back, some rumors were put in motion that deeply upset some of our members. One woman recognized this and, I think, figured that the ones who were upset probably wouldn't check out the facts

themselves, so at an informal gathering she gently asked me what I knew. I can't tell you how much I appreciated that! I think others appreciated it, too. Hearing the facts really set people's minds to rest – and all because this one woman took the principle to heart: *I am responsible for my congregation's well-being.*

Here's yet another example. One of the ministries we really count on here at RLC is our e-mail prayer chain. Do you know how that got started? One of our couples felt a deep need for members to lift up each other in prayer, but there was no regular way to get prayer requests or to share them in a timely manner. Then it dawned on them: "Why not use e-mail?" They talked with me about it, then they did what it took get things started – recruited prayer partners, set up the list, promoted the ministry. Now we take this prayer chain for granted. Prayer requests get e-mailed several times a week. Over 200 people are involved – all because this one couple took the principle to heart: *I am responsible for my congregation's well-being.*

There are many more examples I could mention. That's as it should be. Ideally, there should be way too many for me to even know about. We're far from reaching that point, but shouldn't that be our goal? Everyone looking out for everyone else. Beyond the obvious benefits, this, too, will strengthen our unity and answer Jesus' prayer that we may "**all be one**" – each of us taking the principle to heart: *I am responsible for my congregation's well-being.*

You know, we often talk about Jesus answering *our* prayer, but what an amazing thought that we can answer Jesus' prayer! And what an amazing opportunity! To be sure, Christian unity is a gift. We are baptized into the Body of Christ and held together by the Holy Spirit. Our unity is a gift of grace. But by the same token, a gift doesn't mean much if we don't use it and maintain it – and that's especially true with this gift! That is why St. Paul said, "**Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**" Today we have learned a couple practical principles that will help us do that – remembering:

1. *I am responsible for my own well-being.*
2. *I am responsible for my congregation's well-being.*

As we take these principles to heart and put them to work in our lives, just think! We are in the amazing position of answering Jesus' prayer that we may "**all be one.**" Amen.