

Celebrating Inconvenience

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

02 October 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Ephesians 4:1-6
John 17:1,6, 17-23

“that they may all be one.”

~ John 17:21a.

Prayer

Holy God,

Silence in us all voices

But the whisper of your Holy Spirit.

May the words of my mouth

And the meditation of our hearts

Bring us closer to the truth of the Gospel. Amen.

Mark Twain, the greatest American writer who ever lived is celebrated not only for his keen intellect but also for his sharp-eyed humor, which he deployed very strategically to spotlight the absurdities of our world. In one his delightful and provocative tales, Twain imagines himself building a cage to deal with the contradictions visible in human history. ***“I built a cage,”*** He wrote, ***“and in it I put a dog and a cat. After a little training I got the dog and the cat to the point where they lived peacefully together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds and a monkey. And after a few adjustments, they too learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by my successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Scotch Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim from Turkestan, a Methodist from the wilds of Arkansas, a Salvation Army Colonel from Wapping, a Brahman from [India], and a Buddhist from China – along with a Baptist missionary I captured on the same trip. And in a very short while there wasn’t a single living thing left in the cage!”***¹

We chuckle at Mark Twain’s comic exposure of the divisive tendencies that bedevil all religious traditions because we know his satirical criticism of religion is still tragically on target. And what may be even more tragic in Twain’s tall tale is that the cage did not have to be an interfaith enclosure for things to end the way they did; had it been an ecumenical cage, with only Christian denominations in it, the outcome would have been most likely the same.

The joke around my seminary campus was that if you put a Protestant Christian on a deserted island, he would build three huts. One to be his home. Another to serve as the church where he would worship on Sundays. And the last hut would be the other church he left and would never set foot in again. Interestingly, the first Christian confession of faith

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

ever written in the Americas was penned on an island in the Guanabara Bay of Rio. A doctrinal dispute over the Lord's Supper broke out between French Catholic and Genevan Calvinist settlers in 1558 when the French were trying to establish a foothold on the Brazilian coast. Four leaders among the Calvinists were thrown into prison and given 12 hours to answer in writing and in Latin questions about their faith. Having only a copy of the Bible to help them articulate their beliefs, the Calvinists wrote their confession in the form of a credo, beginning with these words, "**According to the doctrine of St. Peter, the apostle, in his first epistle, all Christians must always be ready to give an answer of the hope inside them (1 Peter 3:15), with all meekness and benevolence.**"² Their humble and gentle Christian confession became their death warrant. The four men were hanged for heresy and the rest of the Calvinists forced to return to Geneva.³

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus was well aware of this human proclivity to translate deeply held beliefs into intolerance, sectarianism, and violence. He knew that there is an endemic weakness in the human soul that instigates a fanatical certainty over the righteousness of what one believes to the point that religion becomes deadly. At the table of his last supper, Jesus was conscious of the predisposition of the human mind to absolutize some religious beliefs and dogmas over others and then turn against anyone who has a different opinion, a different interpretation, or a different understanding of the truth. In his final hours on earth, Jesus was mindful of the possibility that after his death his closest friends might push for theological conformity and communal uniformity that could fracture the Church.

Charles Schulz, the creator of the "*Peanuts comic strips*," illustrated well in a conversation between the sweet Linus and the opinionated Lucy what I imagine was going on in Jesus' head while he was praying for his disciples. With his thumb in his mouth and his security blanket in the other hand, Linus is visibly troubled by the way Lucy treats him. He turns to Lucy, who is right next to him, and asks, "**Why are you always so eager to criticize me?**" Self-assured as always, Lucy responds, "**I just think I have a knack for seeing other people's faults.**" Linus then asks Lucy, "**What about your own faults?**" Lucy responds with confidence, "**I have a knack for overlooking them.**"⁴

The writer of John's Gospel preserved Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers because he knew the Church Universal needs to hear Jesus' prayerful words again and again – "**Father... I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word... 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.**" Despite our very human knack for seeing, pointing out, criticizing, disparaging, misrepresenting, disrespecting and lashing out at what we take to be unacceptable about other faith traditions and the ease with which we overlook the contradictions in our own belief system, Jesus still hoped that people who follow him could be united by God's love. When he imagined the way humanity would come to believe in the truth of the Gospel, Jesus pictured the oneness of Christians as the clearest, boldest and loudest witness of the Church. It sounds risible to say this given the institutional

Church's knack of turning to conflict and division whenever differences arise, but Jesus did pray that the Church would show humanity that it is possible to overcome our propensity to argue, fight and be divided over religious dogmas, traditions, practices and beliefs. There is no question that Jesus understood that there would always be diversity of thought, opinion, beliefs and behavior among his followers. The Oneness he prayed for has nothing to do with making every single one of his disciples recite the same creed, sing from the same hymnal, agree on every matter of biblical interpretation, or worship in the exact same style. In fact, I believe that Jesus would say that rather than focusing on theology, Christology, ecclesiology, orthodoxy, liturgy, polity and ethics, the Church should seek to foster and nurture life in community first. Oneness becomes real when Christian people are part of communities where mutual dependence, trust, friendship and caring love allow us to feel, experience, taste and see the depth of God's love through one another. This is why the oneness of the Church is so important to Jesus and it is so essential to the Christian faith – our oneness is a perennial witness to the truth of the love of God that is capable of transforming our knack for divisiveness into an indestructible hope for a Christian community united by faith, peace, gentleness, patience, humility, where faithful followers of Christ make every effort to lead lives worthy of our call to show through our unity the oneness of God and Christ.

The United Church of Christ, our denomination, was born out of the longing of disparate Christian communities to fulfill Jesus' prayer that his followers may be one. In 1957, the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches of the United States made a bold and historic declaration, "***Affirming our devotion to one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,... and hearing with a deepened sense of responsibility the prayer of our Lord 'that they all may be one; [We] Do now declare ourselves to be one body.'***"⁵ Over the last 65 years, our young denomination has grappled with the reality that oneness does not come easily or naturally to Christians living in a world where life in society is organized around barriers of wealth, education, gender, sexuality, race, skin color, culture, identity, ideology and the human knack for finding fault in the beliefs and religious practices of other people. Since inception, the United Church of Christ realized that there are always growth pains that come with the effort to live into our call to listen to Jesus' prayer and to accept the real challenges inherent in those simple, prayerful words, which are the motto of our denomination, "***that they may all be one.***"

Oneness requires intentionality and engagement. Seeking "***to become completely one***" is in both small and grand scale a hard and, honestly, inconvenient work of Christian hope. I still recall a small incident at the Japanese American congregation I served in Chicago that made the challenge of Jesus' prayer very real at the beginning of my ministry there. I had only been at the church for a couple of months and, as I did every Sunday morning, I took a walk around the sanctuary to make sure everything was ready for the worship service. I noticed that one of the flowers in the vase on the altar was leaning forward, so I gently pushed it in and made sure it fitted in nicely with the rest. I went downstairs to the fellowship hall and when I came back to the sanctuary, on the way to my

office, the same flower was sticking out again. As a devoted pastor, I thought it was my job to restore a more perfect balance to the flower arrangement; so I pushed the flower in only a bit more forcefully this time to make sure it would stay. I turned around, went to my study to put my robe on and, lo and behold, when I walked into the sanctuary the flower was hanging out, again! I was determined to win the battle against the wayward flower, so I proceeded to find another spot for it. Much to my surprise, a woman appeared out of nowhere and, visibly upset, she told me to stop meddling with her flower arrangement. Unknowingly, we had been taking turns “fixing” the same flower. In a slightly angry tone, the woman explained that asymmetry is an important concept in Ikebana – the Japanese flower arranging tradition. I was mortified that I did not know. What looked out of balance in my eyes was for her a sign of the simple beauty of a universe where not everything fits perfectly together as in a jigsaw puzzle. I realized then how inconvenient it would be for the whole church and for me to learn to do ministry side by side.

After yesterday’s church retreat, I spent some time reflecting on the inconvenience of our call to become one, especially in a culture that prizes convenience. Journalist Oliver Burkeman said in an interview with Krista Tippett on “*On Being*” that he has an untested theory that social media and all the technologies we use daily to make our lives easier, smoother and more convenient are affecting how we treat and react to each other. We are used to the idea that we can eliminate the friction of everyday life. The Uber App eliminates the pain of having to track down the number of a local taxi company. Apple Pay removes the small annoyance of having to reach out for your credit card in your wallet at the grocery store. Netflix makes it easier to watch a movie without having to stand in line at the ticket office at the movies. Zoom helps us avoid the inconvenience of traveling to meetings. Facebook and YouTube give us the flexibility to watch the videos of the services whenever it is convenient and takes away the spiritual discipline of being physically or virtually present with the gathered community of faith at 9:30 AM on Sunday. Suddenly, we are dividing our activities into the kind that are far more convenient and the kind that are not. And it becomes aggravating to wait even ten seconds for a slow-loading web page to upload or to wait in line at the theater or to sit through a worship service or to go to church because we are used to not having to wait even two seconds to find out what is happening across the world on our smartphones. I love what Burkeman says about inconvenience. **“Smoothness [or convenience], it turns out, is a dubious virtue, since it’s often the unsmoothed [inconvenient] textures of life that make it livable, helping to nurture the relationships that are crucial for mental and physical health, and for the resilience of our communities.”**⁶

I would also say that the unsmoothed, inconvenient and very human textures of life make the church more meaningful and nurture the relationships that are crucial for our resilience as we live through the everyday pain of seeking oneness.

Today is World Communion Sunday. In a few minutes we will gather at the table with millions of Christians all over the world to remember Jesus’ prayer, **“that they may all be one.”** This Sunday is a yearly reminder to the Church that Jesus believed that oneness

only comes when Christians are willing to be available to one another; to be inconvenienced by each other's differences, passions, idiosyncrasies, life stories, needs, hopes, accents, cultures and spiritual journeys. As we often repeat in the United Church of Christ, we are not only the Christian community united in God's love; we are also the church that is still uniting. We are still trying to live into a more perfect oneness.

At the heart of our faith, there is the sacred story of a God who took the trouble to become flesh in Christ to live among us, as one of us, so that we might know that God's will for us is unity. There may be a cliché in the English language that claims that "***it's the thought that counts***," but the Bible tells us that it is God's willingness to become incarnate, to be inconvenienced by the human need for saving love in flesh and blood, that truly counts. It is also our readiness to embrace the inconvenience of gathering on Sundays, worshipping together, praying with one another, disagreeing without giving up on the church, volunteering to support the ministries of the church, and showing up when it would be far more convenient to do something easier with our time that counts toward the oneness of our congregation.

So friends come to the table this morning and celebrate inconvenience. Give thanks for the people who very inconveniently teach you something about the beauty of oneness where we are not all the same and have to make an effort to understand and be available to each other. Give thanks for the unsmoothed textures of life in our church that nurture the relationships that are crucial for our oneness. And as you eat and drink at the table, may you remember the beautiful words from Ephesians –

Acton Congregational Church, "***... lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***"

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Quoted by Conrad Myers in *The Spirituality of Comedy*, pp. 16-17.

² Creed and Confessions in *The Guanaraba Confession*, [<https://creedsandconfessions.org/guanabara-confession.html>].

³ Centro Presbiteriano de Pós-Graduação Andrew Jumper, História da Igreja, A Confissão de Fé da Guanabara (1558), [<https://cpaj.mackenzie.br/historia-da-igreja/movimento-reformado-calvinismo/confissoes-reformadas/a-confissao-de-fe-da-guanabara-1558/>].

⁴ By Charles Schulz. *Peanuts*, 1989 United Features Syndicate, Inc.

⁵ *Basis of Union of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church*, Preamble, 1943.

⁶ Oliver Burkeman in *Four Thousand Weeks*, p. 10, 50-53, [Kindle edition]. See also, On Being with Krista Tippett in *Time Management for Mortals*, 13 January 2022 [<https://onbeing.org/programs/oliver-burkeman-time-management-for-mortals/>].