

John 13:31-35

Ephesians 4:1-6

July 5, 2015

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

ONE BREAD, ONE BODY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Wednesday morning I had a lot of catching up to do after being out of the country for nine days and away from my study for two weeks. However, I had not counted on participating in a conference call at 9:30 a.m. that lasted for one hour. But I dialed the number and got connected to the conference call for the Mission Cabinet of the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina.

The Mission Cabinet is something like the session of the presbytery. The members of the Mission Cabinet are the chairpersons of the various presbytery committees and other people, such as the moderator of the presbytery. Wednesday's agenda had six items which sixteen people discussed.

The first item on the agenda was how to respond to an action that was taken at the June 11 presbytery meeting regarding the "Policy for Churches Seeking to Separate from the Presbyterian Church (USA)." This nine-page policy was presented for a vote at the June 11 meeting, but a commissioner made a substitute motion that led to about an hour's worth of discussion. At the end of that debate, we did not vote on the proposed policy. Instead, the policy was sent back to the Mission Cabinet, which was asked to gather remarks and suggestions from elders, ministers, and church members about how to revise the policy.

The third item on the agenda had to do with some overtures from the Foothills Presbytery in South Carolina regarding how we do business as a denomination at our General Assembly meetings. A working group from that sister presbytery is asking for feedback about their proposals and suggestions from other presbyteries. If enough presbyteries concur with the overtures offered by the Foothills Presbytery, they will be submitted to the 222nd General Assembly next year in Portland, Oregon.

In the "Background" section at the beginning of their suggestions about how we need to do a better job of dealing with difficult issues in the church, the members of the working group state, "It is time to repent from shrill divisiveness and learn once again to speak and listen to one another in love."

A little later in the report, the working group cites the work of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church that reported to the General Assembly in 2006 and said, in part, "To be one is not to say that we will be the same, that we will all agree, that there will be no conflict, but as the church listens to Jesus pray, all its members are reminded that the quality of our life together — our ability to

make visible the unique relationship that is ours in Jesus Christ — is compelling testimony to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.”

In the wake of the Supreme Court’s 5-4 ruling about same-sex marriage ten days ago, I have received and read many posts on Facebook about that issue. Several colleagues have posted the same article by Travis Garner, a Church Planter in the Tennessee Conference of the United Methodist Church. The article is called “Being a Pastor in a 5-4 World.” The article ends this way: “From Ephesians 4: May we all be rooted and established in love, completely humble and gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Remembering that there is one body and one Spirit, and one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

Interestingly, comments in response to this article ranged from “Thank you for posting this message” to “This post actually makes me want to leave the United Methodist Church.” Actually, that second comment was rather mild compared to some others. It made me wonder if Rev. Garner felt as I did when I came home from being a commissioner to the 220th General Assembly in Pittsburgh in 2012. After spending a week with 600+ Presbyterian elders and ministers from across the United States who diligently and prayerfully tried to do the work of the church that was put before us, I read various articles and comments in publications that characterized us as a “do-nothing General Assembly.” Some comments were even more vicious than that, calling into question the faithfulness and commitment of elders and ministers who had responded to their presbyteries’ call to serve our Lord and the church.

Well, you know what? We live in a polarized, divided world. So what do you expect? Why should we be surprised that we Christians can treat our fellow Christians in such unloving ways? And, just to be clear, over the years, I’ve read and heard plenty of unkind and unfair comments and criticisms on BOTH sides of many issues before the church.

I certainly don’t think I’m naive about life in the church or in the wider world. We face many serious issues on which people of good faith disagree strongly, politically and religiously. As people of faith, we are called to engage with those issues, both within the church and in the broader society. But we need to stop and think about **how** we engage one another in these issues. Interestingly, the working paper from the Foothills Presbytery that offers some concrete suggestions about how we Presbyterians might do a better job of working on difficult issues talks about how the most important moral achievement of religious communities, “the real gifts they give to American public life,” is promoting conversation that is healthy and respectful, and not necessarily agreement on every issue.

The verses I read from Ephesians 4 are a clarion call to the church to live into the unity we have in the body of Christ. I think it’s worth hearing those words again: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worth 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. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:1-6)

These words were written about and to Christians who were faced with some pretty serious theological, social, and racial issues. Jewish and Gentile Christians had to figure out how to be the body of Christ, despite their differences. They did not create the unity. They were called to live *in* the unity that was the fundamental work of God in Jesus Christ. As one person has put it, this unity is “a given to which we are called to yield.”

So, to say, “Well, we live in a divided, polarized nation, so what do you expect to find in the church?” means we are *not* leading a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. Since it’s true that we do live in a divided, polarized world, doesn’t that make it all the more important for us in the church to model — with the grace and help of God — the kind of humility and gentleness and patience and forbearance and love and unity that is characteristic of the body of Christ?

Let me tweak the title of that Facebook article a little bit: “Being the Church in a 5-4 World.” What does it mean to be the church in the kind of world we live in? Another significant event in our nation in the last couple of weeks was the horrific shooting deaths of nine people in the Bible study at the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston. As political pundits weighed in on both sides of the issue and Facebook lit up with all kinds of comments, the members of that church, even the family members of those killed, spoke and acted in a way that drowned out all of the shrill comments, when they forgave the shooter face-to-face at his bond hearing. In an article in *USA Today* about that unexpected and almost unbelievable act, a writer said, “It was neither expected nor explicable, that forgiveness. Such forgiveness is unseen in the animal world, is illogical in the rational world, is nonsensical to common human nature. Such forgiveness is humanity at its most human, or perhaps its most divine.”¹

There’s a beautiful symmetry in Ephesians 4:4-6, which has been called the “sevenfold one.” One — body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, God and Father. Perhaps it’s because the number seven has special significance in the Bible — 7 days of creation; forgiving 7 X 70; and so forth. Still, knowing that it messes up that nice symmetry of seven, let me add: one bread, one cup, one Table.

As the hymn says, “One bread, one body, one Lord of all, one cup of blessing which we bless. And we, though many, throughout the earth, we are one body in this one Lord.”² Today we are invited to come to the Lord’s Table. We come to table as many different people, with many different opinions on many different matters. We come as people with deeply held beliefs and passionate hopes. But most of all, we come as God’s people, one people — one, because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

When you pass the plate of bread to your neighbor this morning, you may be passing it to someone who holds diametrically opposite political beliefs from you.

When you receive the cup from your neighbor today, you may receive it from someone who sees things very differently than you do. But we all come to the table as sinners in need of God's grace. The margin note in today's bulletin next to The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is for all of us: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (1 Corinthians 10:17)

The unity we have in Jesus Christ — the *communion* we share in the body and the blood — is a gift from God. But it is a unity, a communion that we are called to live out as Christians. I don't for a minute think that means life in the Church will always be easy. People of good faith will disagree. Faithful people will see things differently. But for the sake of the Church, for the sake of the world, we must strive to live and act in that "still more excellent way" of love.

One of the things I love about our new hymnal, *Glory to God*, is the large number of communion hymns. I hope we learn and sing most of them in the coming months and years. Hymn #532 is called "Sheaves of Wheat." The note at the bottom of the page says, "This text by a leading Spanish author/composer expands the vivid images of grain and grape used to provide bread and wine for the celebration of the Lord's Supper into symbols of the interconnection of all human experience, but especially of the shared life in Christian community."

Some of the words seem particularly appropriate as we come to the Lord's Table today and as we think about being the Church in a 5-4 world:

*Here we gather to share a common meal,
We are harvest by God the Sower sown,
brought together to share the joys and sorrows that we feel,
all refined by life's common grinding stone.*

*As each grain blends to form a single loaf,
or as notes weave to shape a single song,
or as droplets unite within the ocean's depth and foam,
to each other as Christians we belong.*

*At the table of God we join to eat,
and as sisters and brothers break the bread.
Fed by faith, hope, and love, we sing our joy to all we meet,
as the body of Christ, our living head.*

Let us pray: O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as there is but one body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, so may we all be of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity. With one mind may we glorify you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹John S. Dickerson, “Charleston victims wield power of forgiveness,” *USA Today* June 22, 2015 at www.usatoday.com.

²Hymn #530 in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*.