

Seventh Sunday in Easter
May 13, 2018

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Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-15
John 17:1-3, 11, 17-23

Synergy

*That they may be one, even as we are one. I
in them and you in me. – John 17:22, 23*



There's a true story about the late, great Ed Sullivan and the comedian, Jimmy Durante. It was in the months after the Second World War. Sullivan arranged shows for the Wounded Warriors, and persuaded A-list stars to perform in hospitals.

Jimmy Durante explained that he'd like to do it, but he had already agreed to perform at a private party that night. If Sullivan would allow him to do just one, short monologue, and then leave, he felt he could make his next appointment.

The night of the show, Durante went out on stage and did his routine, including his famous "Inky Dinky Doo." The crowd roared with applause, so loud that at the end of it, Durante grabbed the microphone back, and did eight more complete routines!

Backstage, Ed Sullivan caught him wiping the sweat off his face with a towel. Ed said:

"Jimmy, you were fantastic! But I thought you had to leave. You'll never make your private party now!"

"I know," Jimmy said, "but let me show you why I stayed." He pointed through the gap in the curtain out into the audience. In the front row there were two soldiers, a lieutenant on the right who had lost his left arm, and one on the left who had lost his right arm. With no self-consciousness at all, they were wildly clapping their two remaining hands together.

Durante later said that it was the most soul-satisfying applause he had ever received. ¹

Let us pray:

God in three persons, as Jesus prayed to you, so do we. Speak your word to us today. Show us your beauty and your truth. Unite us; make us one as you are three in one. Bring together all the possibilities you have for us. We pray this in the name of Jesus and to his glory. Amen.

When I read that story about Jimmy Durante and the soldiers, it struck a chord in me. I think it's because it feels like something is missing up here too. Pastor Brandon ran off to join the Presbyterians in Kansas. He and Aaryn and the kids send their love. They're doing fine. Pastor

Nancy's Sabbatical ends soon – in fact, she'll be back next Sunday. She wrote that she's learned more in these 3 months than she ever hoped, and she can't wait to share some of it with you. Elizabeth Baril will be joining us as Minister to Youth and Families beginning in June, and your Associate Pastor Nominating Committee is hard at work to fill Brandon's position.

Still it feels like there's a lot of coming and going around here, doesn't it?

It's not just the pastors who are missing. Some of our other loved ones have gone too. Some have literally gone home to God. We grieve that loss; we always will. At the same time, glorious new members have come, and we are blessed by you. Others move away. I've heard from 3 families just this week who are moving. Still others are here; we just don't see them anymore. It's not just Woods: 94% of America's churches are experiencing double digit decreases in worship attendance and other church programs.ⁱⁱ That hurts the most. People are simply somewhere else on Sundays. There's a lot of coming and going.

The apostle Paul knew how it felt to miss the people he loved. Paul pastored more churches in a year than most ministers do in a lifetime. He loved each one. In today's first reading he writes to the Ephesians begging them to "bear with one another in love." I like the way the Common English Bible renders this:

Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity ... that binds you together.

In this individualistic age, that essential unity can be hard to achieve, everyone spinning in a different direction. Paul called the church to unity and compares it to a human body, Christ's body, a diverse body with many parts and abilities, many members. There are all kinds of gifts, he said, differing talents: Some are artists, others teachers. (We need a lot of you to claim that gift, and SOON! God has blessed us with lots and lots of children at Woods Church!) Some are gifted in pastoral care; others speak God's word. The reason all these gifts are given us by God, the purpose, the goal – has nothing to do with strengthening you and me personally. No, the goal is ... what? The purpose of all those gifts is that all may come to unity of faith, and knowledge of the Son of God. It's Jesus! He is the point! We are all part of him.

So what happens when someone is missing? If the church is literally Christ's body on earth – Teresa of Avila said, "He has no hands on earth but our hands." True? When an arm, or an eye, or any other part of the body is missing or lost, then what?

At that point one of two things will happen. Either the body will be devastated and begin to believe that it is "handicapped" or the body will compensate, adapt and re-form itself in unity, like the two soldiers clapping for comedian Jimmy Durante's act.

What makes the difference? How do you know which way it will go? I've struggled to understand the determining factors. Faith is certainly a key element, faith and the ability to trust the new thing God is working among us. Communication is also very important. Every member needs to feel that he or she is an essential part of the body, and that we all matter.

The third factor is Synergy –the way in which various parts work together for the benefit of the whole. Paul loves this idea – he mentions it all the time. Synergy is the cooperation of various parts that produce a combined effect greater than the sum of our parts.

Those of you who study physiology have told me that every cell in the body works in relationship to every other cell. The purpose of every cell is to empower the others. The only cell that exists for itself is a cancer cell.

Buckminster Fuller, the American architect and inventor wrote a book called *Synergetics*. He points out that if all the muscles in the human body were to pull together in one direction, one person could lift 25 tons. That would be like Sue/Tom lifting two-and-a-half fully loaded trucks. She/he’s in great shape but I suspect one truck would be a stretch for you.

That is synergy. It means, says Fuller, that “One plus one can equal four if we put our efforts together in the same direction.”ⁱⁱⁱ

That was Jesus’ great hope for the church. The gospel reading for today is Jesus’ pastoral prayer, sometimes called his High Priestly Prayer. It is only hours until his arrest, trial and crucifixion. He speaks plainly “not as a needy petitioner, but [as a] divine revealer.”^{iv} He prays on behalf of his loved ones, “that they may be one, even as we are one.” Listen to John, chapter 17, selected verses:

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,² since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

²⁰ “I ask not only on behalf of these, 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.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Five times in his prayer Jesus asks God to grant us unity. In some of his last words, Jesus repeats how important it is that his followers stand together. He knows that much of what will happen in the days to come will pull them apart. So he prays, “Sanctify them in the truth...make them one.”

Ed White used to be the presbytery executive over in DC. He likes to tell about growing up in Boston as an ardent Red Sox fan and an even more ardent Celtics fan. Being a Sox fan was the most frustrating thing in the world because:

“They had half the stars in the American league. But in spite of all that talent, [in those days] they seldom won a championship. They never learned to work together as a team. They were a bunch of individual glory boys, each trying to hit the ball out of the park. They acted like they didn’t know what a squeeze bunt was. Consequently, they often lost the tight one-run game that would have made a difference. The Celtics were just the opposite. They won the NBA championship 11 years out of 13. Yet most years none of the top individual scorers were Celtics. They had such a beautifully balanced and blended team they were able to beat all the teams with individual stars.”^v

So here’s the relevant question: How do you function? Your marriage, your family, your ministry, your team? Does your business, your church function more like the Celtics, or like the Red Sox?

I can speak for the church. This congregation has a great history – a history of generosity, a history of sacrifice, a history of giving ourselves away on behalf of others, especially those in need. God has been good to us, and we are grateful. We express our gratitude in generosity. That’s who we are at Woods.

But there’s a danger. These are fractious times, more so than I have ever seen. There’s more division, more talk of isolation and keeping people out than I’ve ever heard; there’s more distrust. The prophet Isaiah put it this way:

We are like sheep that have gone astray; we have all turned, each to our own way.^{vi}

You’ve experienced it -- families ripped apart by each turning to his or her own way. It happens on teams, the Red Sox have gotten over that, thank goodness. It happens in churches too. How many people do you know who have just walked away from their churches when they don’t get their way. This cannot be pleasing to God.

Jesus prayed that we would be one.

Bill Coffin, the great preacher and former pastor of Riverside Church in New York, told a story about unity and a mother’s love in one Minnesota farm family. One day, while the farmer was away and his wife was busy in the house, their toddler son wandered out of the house and into the wheat field.

Immediately the mom noticed he was gone. She began to search for him. When she couldn’t find him, she called her neighbors and together they searched though acres and acres of wheat. She called the farm hands. As the afternoon wore on, and night began to fall, they still hadn’t found the boy. The temperature was dropping.

People began to pour in – every kind of person – workers from the mill and the mill owner; doctor, plumber, teachers, and students beating their way through fields of wheat, walking and running in every direction, calling to the child. Hours passed but they couldn't find him.

When it looked hopeless, the terrified, exhausted mother cried out:

“We are going off in all directions. If we join hands we can sweep every inch of the fields.”

And so they did. The gas station attendant held hands with the lawyer. The high school basketball player held hands with the store clerk. People from different stations, faiths, political parties, perspectives, joined hands until they had walked every inch of the huge farm. As the space narrowed, someone reached down and picked up the sleeping baby, and handed him to his mother.^{vii}

In this age of too many bitter divisions, Jesus still prays for us – he prays for us just as he did long ago. So let's pray as he did. Let us pray:

Make us one, Heavenly Father, as you are in Christ and he is in you, may you be in us. Draw us to one another and to you, so that the world may believe. Amen.

ⁱ James Maguire, *Impresario: The Life and Times of Ed Sullivan*, Billboard Books, 2006, 10.

ⁱⁱ Kelly Shattuck, “Seven Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance” *ChurchLeaders*, April 10, 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Buckminster Fuller, *Synergetics: An Exploration of the Geometry of Thinking*, McMillan, 1975, 108.3

^{iv} Ernst Kasemann by Gerard Sloyan, *John*, John Knox Press, 196.

^v Ed White, *Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations*, Alban Institute, 1990, 89.

^{vi} Isaiah 53:6

^{vii} William Sloane Coffin, from a sermon preached March 11, 1941, by Ed White, 92.