



**“Praying for a Miracle”**

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***Seventh Sunday after Easter 2007  
May 20, 2007  
John 17:20-26 (NRSV)***

Today’s gospel reading is taken from John, chapter 17, verses 20-26. To understand the significance of this passage, we need to have a sense of the passage’s context within the larger narrative of John’s gospel and the life of Jesus.

Chronologically speaking, Jesus’ prayer for unity for his disciples is situated within the last week of his earthly life, just before his arrest, imprisonment, and crucifixion.

The prayer is presumed to have taken place in a private setting, and yet it is a prayer that John seems to have witnessed, or that he constructed out of the community’s understanding of what Jesus’ life and ministry were all about.

It’s helpful in interpreting the fourth gospel to understand that John is more of a metaphorical gospel than an historical one. The author and the community who received and passed on this gospel lived a generation or two after the death of Jesus, and were far more concerned with the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection than with the historical facts of his existence.

A pretty clear indicator that today’s passage is reflective of the metaphor and meaning of Jesus’ life and ministry is that his prayer for unity does not appear in any of the other gospels (Matthew, Mark or Luke), which were circulated among contemporaries of Jesus and which were written down a generation earlier than the gospel of John. The other gospels describe Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane, but they do not describe this same theme of unity as we find in John’s gospel.

The meaning, then, of today’s passage seems to be that John and his community understood Jesus’ ministry to be a unifying ministry, and therefore John has constructed in his imagination this story about Jesus’ prayer for unity.

Perhaps this constructive approach seems far fetched or irrelevant, and gives us yet one more reason to discount the Bible’s significance. But before we write off the Bible, so to speak, let’s think for a moment about how we approach difficult

situations in our lives. Perhaps we, like John, strive to invoke the wisdom of those who have gone to God and draw insight from their witness when we are faced with difficult challenges.

I know I do this. For example, sometimes when things are haywire in my family or when an individual family member is struggling with a tough situation, I find myself wondering what Grandma would do or say about this or that. Invoking Grandma's memory, and her wisdom in imagined conversations or scenarios, I often gain instant clarity about how to proceed or what to say.

In professional situations, I often wonder what one or more of my mentors would do. Since most of them have gone to God, I can't call 'em up and ask 'em. I have to imagine them in the setting and how they would respond, or imagine myself in a conversation with them, based on previous conversations, and extrapolate from those experiences.

I have observed our Fellowship Committee following a similar approach when faced with an opportunity to offer hospitality in a new context. Numerous have been the occasions when I have heard Anne Duey raise the question, "What would Jack do?" (Jack Reed was one of the core members of an erstwhile couples' club called Firesiders, and part of the core of our current Fellowship Committee.)

Imagine the prospect of next Sunday's Confirmation Celebration when we will confirm eight youth, who will bring their parents and siblings and an unknown number of friends and relatives, to one of the most important services of the year. There are no sign ups. There is no ticket price, and there is no budget for this event—just a ton of people coming to a lunch which will be served immediately after worship. What would Jack do?

Only the Fellowship Committee can answer the fine points of that question, but broadly speaking, based on my memory of Jack Reed, a man who LOVED CHILDREN and loved us all, I suspect that Jack would say, "Keep it simple. Make it kid friendly, and invite everybody." So we are!

So now that you know a bit more about the decision-making processes of your pastor and our Fellowship Committee, I wonder what the rest of us would say. Whose memory and what principles do you invoke in critical decision-making times? Who are those matriarchs and patriarchs and mentors to whom you turn in real-time or in imagined constructions for insight and inspiration?

As we become clearer about our own touchstones for decision making and discernment, it may be easier for us to understand how John's gospel evolved, and in particular how the unity prayer emerged in his narrative.

Know that John was not only an evangelist; he was a pastor and preacher to an early Christian enclave, who found themselves embroiled in a religious community and a Roman world inhospitable to the gospel message and rife with internal wounds and conflicts that could otherwise drive wedges into their community. Within this context it seems that John, like us, wondered what Jesus would do. The resounding answer that came back to him was this: "Jesus would pray for unity."

## II

Pressing further, we might ask, "What kind of unity?" There are many types to consider.

There is, for example, the kind of **unity that occurs through conformity**. My beloved, Stephanie, spent two years on a Fulbright Fellowship in Indonesia studying the issues of unity and diversity as they emerge within that nation's context. Early in Stephanie's research process, I joined her for a month living in her research setting which was a small, rural rice-farming village in East Java.

From my brief experience, and her more lengthy observations, we learned that Indonesia is an extraordinarily diverse nation whose motto emphasizes unity, but whose unity is fostered by political and cultural structures that impose conformity. Indonesia's unity is achieved through conformity. My 30-day experience of government oversight in that nation brought quickly to mind Aldous Huxley's utopian novel *Brave New World*. Unity in Indonesia then was ensured by strict police and military oversight, numerous layers of bureaucracy, and regimented behavior patterns at every level of society.

Unity through conformity is one type of unity. I don't think this is the kind of unity that Jesus prayed for.

Another type of unity that we find in modern society is what social psychologists call "**group-think**," or what the rest of us might describe as "mutual accommodation of error." Group think occurs when people in decision-making processes "check their brains at the door," either because they have not developed good critical thinking skills or because they are part of a culture that has so long discounted critical thinking skills, or that has discouraged dissent, that people stop developing alternative approaches to what has become normative for their group.

A cartoon that I recall from the mid 1980s about nuclear disarmament exemplifies the meaning of group think. In this single cartoon frame, captions above each person's head in a large group of people read, "How could one person possibly turn around the arms race?" The implied answer to the question was, "They couldn't, unless they abandoned their self-doubts and sense of powerlessness, and banded together to address their common concern."

To paraphrase the late great anthropologist, Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world. It’s the only thing that ever has.”

Jesus prayed for unity. He prayed that his disciples might all be one. I am pretty sure that he was not praying for conformity, and I am positive that he was not praying for group-think.

Other options for unity exist. Another form of unity is the kind of unity associated with **political expedience**. We see many examples of unity that result from political expedience in our nation.

How often have we heard politicians describing political expedience when they return home and have to defend a position taken on Capital Hill which demonstrates a compromise of the principles on which they campaigned?

Invariably the politician’s retort has something to do with democracy requiring compromise, and the necessity of abandoning some items in his or her agenda to advance other ideas that are more achievable if not more desirable for constituents. So, politics is not for purists. Politics is for people who are results-oriented, and who are willing and able to make compromises to achieve some measure of the outcomes that they envision.

Was this the kind of unity that Jesus prayed for?

I doubt it.

### III

So, if Jesus’ prayer for unity was not a prayer for political expedience, if it was not a prayer for passive acceptance, and it was not a prayer for conformity, what, in fact, might Jesus have been praying for?

I think Jesus was praying for **spiritual unity**.

“What is spiritual unity?” you may ask.

Spiritual unity can influence political change, but it is rarely politically expedient. Our keynote speaker at the NCNC UCC Annual Meeting this past weekend, the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Samuel, founding pastor of Victory Church in Atlanta, Georgia, reminded us that there may be repercussions for the political stands that a person may make, if their stands are not just expedient.

Dr. Samuel said that when Dr. King spoke out against the Vietnam War he lost a great deal of financial support from liberal Yankees, who were supporters of LBJ, because they didn’t like Dr. King criticizing their President. Dr. King’s response to his detractors was to say, “I will not lower my voice to raise the budget.”

To be sure, it would have been politically and financially expedient for Dr. King to lower his voice, or to have made no mention of the Vietnam War in his public witness, but he believed that God had called him to make those statements and he knew that a prophet's words were not always welcome and he was willing to accept the consequences for following the spirit's lead, rather than making a decision that might have increased financial support for his ministry.

Dr. King's words are a sharp reminder that spiritual unity is rarely politically expedient, but his life-long commitment and the life-long commitment of his wife, Coretta Scott King, and their children, including their daughter Yolanda, who recently passed, point to the larger truth that spiritual unity can lead to political change.

What else can we surmise about spiritual unity? Based on Acts 2, I think we can say that **spiritual unity is a gift from God.**

Acts 2, the Day of Pentecost, recounts the time when Jesus' followers were gathered in Jerusalem collectively seeking guidance of the Holy Spirit about what they would do next, now that Jesus had ascended into heaven. The answer came to them through the gift of the spirit so that people from every known culture could understand each other even though everyone was speaking their own language, and all received the charter of the church: that we should be about *diakonia*, *kononia*, *liturgia*, and *kerygma*. (I'll say a lot more about what these principles are about next week.)

For the moment, let us simply ponder what a miracle it is when people from every known culture come together, they understand each other though they speak their own language, and they achieve unity on anything.

Our own United Church of Christ (UCC) denomination is so diverse that it feels like a microcosm of those who gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Some have opined that we are a church that only agrees on one thing—to disagree. For those who come from fundamentalist traditions, you know that agreeing to disagree in churches is not a given. Those who know a little of the history of the UCC and our predecessor denominations know that this unity is no small miracle—liturgically or culturally.

The Congregational, Evangelical, and Reformed denominations represent three of the four major denominations that formed the UCC. They practiced infant baptism and held communion no more than monthly. Meanwhile, the Christian Churches of the Central Atlantic area practiced believer's baptism and never worshiped without including the Eucharist in their services.

On a cultural note, the Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund, President of Hartford Seminary, and noted historian of the UCC once said in a workshop that I at-

tended at the Rochester General Synod in 1980, “The United Church of Christ is a miracle.” At the grassroots level, she recounted, it seemed like the merger boiled down to the dress codes of the women’s groups. The E&R women’s guild members wore dresses and gloves to their meetings, and the CC women’s fellowship members wore polyester pantsuits. Observers on both sides wondered whether this marriage could be saved. Saved it was. Concern about dress codes nowadays seems silly, but those who have been around for the last 50 years or more know how deeply cultural norms can be held, and what a miracle it is to move beyond the constraints of cultural norms and for the UCC to be on the cusp of celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

**Unity of spirit means that we affirm our unity amidst our diversity.** We speak and understand each others’ languages. We embrace our cultural differences as a gift rather than interpreting them as a threat. We open our hearts and minds and make adjustments based on new information that we receive, believing that God is still speaking and that we ought to be listening and evolving as a consequence. So while unity of spirit can result in a meeting of the minds and a syncing of hearts, it is not the result of passive acceptance of a group’s norms.

**Spiritual unity also means we share common goals, though we may have different levels of engagement or different ways of achieving those goals.** Because of our UCC commitment to grass-roots participation, dialogue, and debate, the people who make and repair copy machines and who process and sell paper love us. (They love us, because we crank out so much paper making sure that everyone has a copy, knows what we’re talking about and voting on, and possesses any revisions under consideration that we go through a ton of paper.)

Observers and insiders alike know that we rarely come to decisions quickly, but when we are at our best in the UCC, we learn from our conversations and we develop better, healthier, and more faithful outcomes as a result of them. So, an important characteristic of spiritual unity is that we remain as open to change as we remain adamant to change another’s mind or heart.

One of the things that has impressed me about Eden Church, at least on my watch, is the members and friends of this congregation—though not necessarily like minded—come to worship and to the meeting table determined to seek what’s best for the church and to act in ways that help us fulfill our high calling as the people of God. This is sadly not the case in all churches. Sometimes individuals’ egos or agendas take precedence over the mission of the church.

One of the clearest ways that we demonstrate our unity of spirit as members of this congregation is through the **pledges and gifts** that we offer for the ministry of Christ, through Eden Church. By making and fulfilling, adjusting, and meeting or exceeding our pledges, we exhibit a unity of spirit. We give, not because we necessarily benefit directly from every aspect of the church’s ministry. We give not because we value all aspects of the ministry the same. And we give not be-

cause we even understand every aspect of the church's ministry. But we pledge and we contribute of our time, talent, and treasure as a witness to our spiritual unity with one another and with Christ.

A result of spiritual unity is that **we are bigger than the sum of our parts**. We accomplish more than we might otherwise be able to imagine or accomplish on our own.

## V

Several members of the Eden Diaspora recently returned home for our rededication celebration and commented on the significance of completing the fourth phase of our campus renovation. Wonderful as it is to have a safer building, a tighter roof, and new carpet, paint, and seating—the thing that they were universally most amazed with (and I share their amazement) was the way that the congregation came together to make this campus renovation and this celebration possible. These efforts represented a *huge* communal effort.

Jeannie Schuman, one in that number, sat in my office late Sunday night, May 6, after all the dishes were washed and all but a handful had left the building and she said to me with tears in her eyes, “Arlene, I used to think that miracles only happened in the Bible. But now I know that they happen at Eden Church. It’s a miracle that everyone has come together to make this campus come back to life and to put on this celebration today. It’s a miracle! I want you to know that I believe in miracles, because I’ve seen one right here at Eden Church.”

I think Jeannie said it best. **Spiritual unity is a miracle**. When Jesus prayed that his disciples might all be one—those who lived around him, and those who continue to be his followers—he was praying for a miracle.

Thank you, friends, for the many wonderful ways that you continue to make this miracle of spiritual unity happen at Eden Church. Thank you for your gifts of good will, and for your gifts of time, talent, and treasure. May God bless you. May God bless Eden Church. And may God help us continue in this spirit of unity. Amen.