

## Meditation – “Strength Is Unity”

Sunday, May 9, 2021

Scripture: John 17:1-11

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Our gospel reading is John 17:1-11. Jesus prays for himself and for the disciples. In Jesus' prayer, we sense the longing of a mother who cannot be present to protect her children and who prays for their well being in her absence. Jesus' prayer that they may be one as he and the father are one gives us a glimpse into the understanding of God as the Trinity, three in one. The Trinity would become the doctrine that defined the early church at the Council of Nicaea, when Christianity became the official religion of Rome three hundred years later. Listen now for God's word.

17 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, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

<sup>6</sup> “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup> for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. <sup>9</sup> I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. <sup>10</sup> All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. <sup>11</sup> 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. Amen.

The title of the meditation: Strength is Unity

*Text: And now I am no longer in the world...holy father, protect them...so that they may be one, as we are one. John 17:11*

Let us pray. Loving God, give us the strength of unity in our life together and give us a broader understanding of what it means to be united. Amen.

Mother's Day was declared a national holiday in 1914 by President Woodrow Wilson, however its beginning goes back to 1872 when American feminist, abolitionist, and author Julia Ward Howe challenged women to join her in a Mother's Day Proclamation for Peace. Remembered best for writing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Julia was also the inspiration to set aside a day each year to honor mothers. Her emphasis; however, was women united for peace. Upset by the tragic effects of the Civil war, especially the pain of mothers losing sons, wives losing husbands, and the economic crisis that followed, she called on women to unite in opposition against war in all its forms.

“Unity is Strength” is the title of a sculpture by Dutch artist Sophie Hupkens found at the entrance to the North Church in the Jordaan neighborhood of Amsterdam. It depicts three young women bound together and was created as a memorial to the Jordaan Riots in 1934. The economic crash following World War I meant the loss of meaningful work, the spread of poverty, the eruption of riots, and the rise of reactionary regimes throughout Europe. The 1934 Theological Declaration of Barmen, one of our Presbyterian confessions, spoke strength in unity against the absolute, corrupt, and dangerous authority of these regimes. The three bound women remind us of how our connection in community brings us solidarity both in suffering and in strength.

This past year of Covid-19 has brought this truth home in a powerful way affirming once again that “unity is strength” in the choices we make to protect ourselves and one another to contain this destructive virus.

When I first saw the sculpture “Unity is Strength” outside a church in the midst of a flea market on a Monday morning, I was struck by its ordinariness and at the same time by its symbolism for the Trinity. The three figures bound together are a feminine reminiscence of the three persons within the godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and these three persons are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory, as the Shorter Catechism articulates so beautifully. It is the unity of spirit rather than the masculinity of the persons within the Godhead that gives the Trinity meaning.

When Jesus lovingly prays for his followers to be one, as he is one with the Father, Jesus is not referring to the sameness of thinking and feeling which often diminishes strength and squelches creativity; Jesus is referring to the state of being united toward a purpose or joined as a whole.

On this Mother’s Day, I would like to share a story about my mother that sheds light on what Jesus meant by strength in unity among his disciples. As a former church organist and a person who feels music, my mother looked forward to training her children to sing in harmony. We would sit around her piano and she would teach us the melody of a song until we could carry the tune. She then would proceed to sing the accompanying notes that because of their different tones would blend with our notes to make an agreeable sound. In theory, the end result is harmony.

In our home, the end result was one frustrated musician and three bewildered children because without exception, we would blithely begin singing the same notes that our mother was singing. Even if our little ears could differentiate between our voice and our mother’s voice, our little voices were not strong enough to continue to express themselves once the clear, strong voice of our mother began singing the different notes. Therefore, harmony was impossible.

I can remember trying different experiments to aid my ability to sing in harmony—two in particular. First, I sang really loudly to solve the problem. I believe in psychological terms this is called overcompensation. I confused quantity with quality. My volume only drowned out the other differing tones.

When this approach failed, I tried again. This time my logic told me I could carry my melody if only I wasn’t distracted by the differing notes...so I proceeded to cover my ears, trying to block out the other voices. I believe in psychological terms this is called denial. My refusing to be attuned with the other voices prevented the possibility of harmony and rhythm.

I would propose that living in unity within a faith community is not unlike singing in harmony....it is an art and a discipline. When Jesus prays for his disciples to be one, to live in unity, he is not asking for the sameness of thinking and acting as in a monotone. Quite the contrary, Jesus believed any attempt to impose authoritarian uniformity would threaten the unity of his disciples. He encourages them to welcome those who are different, yet whose faith share a common purpose and affection. Differences, when enhanced in the melody of life, bring about a blend of harmony, an agreeable sound, a depth, and a richness that gives us a glimpse of God's spirit at work.

For Jesus, strength in unity is not insisting on one's own way as the only way. Strength in unity is being confident in oneself and one's relationship to God ---so much so that living alongside those who are different is not threatening.

Strength in unity does not drown out the voices of those around or try to block them out. Strength in unity is being able to sing more softly or more loudly depending on the mix to balance the blend in a harmony. Strength in unity is possible when one has a voice, which is strong enough to stand on its own, and an ear, which gently listens to the voices of others.

On this Mother's Day, may we as men and women, children and adults, find strength in our unity as a faith community, may we celebrate the differing voices among us, the song in every silence, and may we unite our voices for healing, for peace, and for justice. Amen.