

New Life International Fellowship
Yangon, Myanmar
Sermon by Rev. Timothy C. Geoffrion, Ph.D.
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"What will bring us together?"

Biblical Texts: John 16:33-17:1-3, 6-9, 15-23

Introduction

We live in a fractured world. There is division and hostility among nations, religious groups, races, ethnic groups, and political parties. Sometimes, this disunity turns ugly and violent. Just this week, the US Embassy released a warning that US intelligence had uncovered credible threats of imminent attacks by rebel groups in Yangon, Mandalay, and Nay Pyi Taw.

In the church, there is distrust and conflict among denominations and even within church fellowship groups as well. At the extreme, such as what we witnessed over the past few centuries in Europe, Catholics have persecuted Protestants and Protestants (e.g., in Spain and France) have persecuted Catholics (e.g., in Ireland). More often, the disunity is more subtle. One church or denomination judges another because of their doctrine, their position on social issues, the way they do baptism. Inside of any particular churches, division and lack of unity can arise over differences in how we worship, which translation of the Bible we read from, lifestyle differences, or just how we look or talk.

It's a crying shame. Judging, condemning, rejecting, and fighting with one another may be human nature, but it is not at all what God wants for us, and it is certainly not what Jesus Christ died for. Today, it's too much for us to try to focus on promoting unity in the whole world. Instead, we're going to talk about Jesus' vision for unity among Christians and in the church—how it's possible and why it's so important.

Prayer

Scripture reading: John 16:33-17:1-3, 6-9, 15-23

What we have in common as Christians

In our biblical passages this morning, the theme of unity is very clear. But unity is not something we can achieve in our own strength. According to the verses we read, unity among Christians comes from focusing on what we have in common rather than on our differences. But it is not just mental or intellectual agreement. What we have in common as Christians is our relationship with God through Christ and the presence of Christ within us through his Spirit.

- The greater our spiritual vitality, the more life we have to draw on to interact with others.
- The more peace we have through Christ, the more we can work for peace among us.
- The more joy we know in the Spirit, the more we can foster joyful fellowship in the church

Jesus' peace and prayer for unity

At the end of John chapter 16, Jesus explains to his disciples, “I have told you these things [his teachings], so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

1. Peace in Jesus. Jesus saw very well that there was much trouble in the world, especially for Christians. Now, today we're not focusing on the trouble that comes from persecution or discrimination against Christians. We're just focusing on the trouble we experience in the church. But our hope in the midst of conflict and relational troubles is the same, no matter what the context. We may not be able to resolve all our differences, but we can experience inner peace in the midst of uncomfortable diversity and tensions.

Jesus said that those who are “in him” will experience peace in their lives, even in the midst of a hostile environment. And when we keep reading to see what he said in his prayer for the believers, we can understand more about what it means to be in him and why that might bring us inner peace.

2. Eternal life is relational and experiential. In chapter 17, in the first few verses, we read: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

Here Jesus defines eternal life in a very important way that relates to our topic of unity and inner peace. He does not define eternal life as everlasting life, or life after death (even though it includes that). Rather, **eternal life is relational and experiential at its core, beginning with our personal relationship with God and Christ.**

- So, to be “in Jesus” must mean more than just knowing his teachings or believing in him as your Savior. It also means, knowing him relationally and experientially.
- When we know Jesus and God in this personal way, we will experience the peace of Christ. We will know that our lives are in God's hands and that Christ is with us all the time, in all circumstances, and that we can face our fears and handle our conflicts from a secure place of inner peace. This is part of what it means to experience eternal life now.

3. But there's more to Jesus' vision. Jesus continues his prayer, first praying for his disciples and then for those who will believe in him on account of the witness of the disciples. Let's pick it up in verse 20.

“My prayer is not for them [the original disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

- Can you see how the relational nature of eternal life and inner peace in Christ form the basis for Jesus' vision and prayer for the world? God's plan was to unite us with the Father and Jesus Christ to give us life and peace as individuals and then together as the body of Christ. This unity, rooted in a personal relationship with God and an experience of inner peace, then is to keep expanding to draw others into communities of faith, life,

and peace. In other words, Jesus' vision for life, peace and love is an ever-expanding network of relationships, grounded in a relationship with God, the Father and with him.

Jesus' intention for us

Jesus' prayer for you and me shows what he most wants for us.

1. First, we would believe in the message that the key to life and peace comes through knowing the Father and Jesus Christ in a personal way.
2. Second, we would truly know the Father and Jesus Christ relationally and experientially, and that relationship with God will transform us inwardly, in our hearts and minds.
3. Third, our common faith and experience with God through Christ will unify us with one another.
4. Fourth, ultimately, our unity will become a sign to the world that Jesus Christ truly came from God and that through Christ we can know God and we can know God's love and peace inwardly and among us.

Love is key

If we were to step back and look at all of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, we would find that the most important thing in life is love. If you truly know God, you will know his love. If you truly know Christ, you will show his love to others. And that common experience of knowing God, knowing Christ, knowing God's love and Christ's peace, and sharing the message of Christ and his love and peace with the world—all that can and should unify us. True peace with God leads to peace with one another.

Many of us know that in theory, but still struggle with it in application. It's just human, and besides, some people are really hard to accept and get along with, right? Well, no matter how hard relational issues may be, it's still our calling seek greater harmony and peace with one another. And to do so requires more love from God in our hearts.

Our calling to seek and promote unity explains why our highest priority must be to keep cultivating our relationship with God and praying that we will know him and Christ's love and peace more and more. The Apostle Paul said that his highest priority was to know Christ and the power of his resurrection in his life. When he prayed for the Ephesians, he asked God to fill their hearts with more and more of Christ's love.

I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 4:14-19)

This is the only way you and I can hope to overcome our prejudices, judgmental attitudes, and fears about people who are different from us. The more we experience the love of God personally, the stronger we will become, the more spiritual power we will have, the more we will

become like Jesus Christ, and the more peace and joy we will experience. The more of God that is inside of us, the more we have to draw on for our relationships with those who are outside of us. It's only God's love, the peace of Christ, and our common commitment to accept, love, and appreciate one another that's going to bring us together as a local church and as Christians throughout the world.

But you have to want it, and you have to be willing to work at it.

Application

- Have you heard Christ's call to know him and to know his peace?
- Are you actively seeking to know the Father's love and Christ's love for yourself?
- Are you willing to focus more on what you have in common with your brothers and sisters in Christ than on your differences for the sake of unity and your witness?
- What are you going to do differently to grow spiritually and to promote more unity?