Dr. Suzanne Allen

First United Methodist Church

Springboro, Ohio

May 8, 2016

Series: “The Gifts of Easter”

Message: “The Gift of Unity”

Scripture: John 17:20-26

 This is the 7th and last weekend of Easter and we are still celebrating! We are still unpacking and figuring out how to use the gifts of Easter because we want Easter to be more than just a day for us, but we want it to be a way of life in which we embrace and live into the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

 This week we return to John 17 as our gift guide. Last week we looked at the first two sections of this chapter and considered the gift of prayer and the way that Jesus gives us the example of praying for ourselves first and then praying for our inner circle that God has given us to teach and empower.

 This week, as we pick up with vs. 20, Jesus continues with his prayer and he expands his focus to pray for all people, even throughout time, who believe in him. It really is striking, isn’t it, to think that on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus was praying for you and for me, for each of us. It’s a powerful reminder for us to allow our prayer time to widen and lengthen our perspective on our life and ourselves. Have you ever prayed for people 2,000 years from now? It never really crossed my mind to do so, but Jesus does.

 So as he prays for the world, we might wonder, “What do you pray for when you’re praying 2,000+ years into the future? He doesn’t pray for the things we often hear prayed for at a global level—that ours will be a Godly nation, or that we will return to the good old days or old fashioned morals. He doesn’t even pray that there will be an end to disease and hunger and injustice.

 Instead, he prays for unity for all believers. He prays that all believers might be one in him even as he is one with God. He says, “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

 Why does he pray for this? Why is this so important to him? When we are united in him, he says, we will see his glory. I think that means that it will help us to continue to grow in our faith and to remember our purpose as his followers. And when we are focused in this way, our unity will be a sign to the world, of the fullness of God’s love and grace.

 Jesus’ prayer is that we will receive and live in the gift of unity. Perhaps out of all the gifts of Easter, this one is the most challenging, the most seemingly far-fetched. We might think it’s a good thing that Jesus started praying for us 2,000+ years ago because it’s going to take that much prayer, and maybe more for us to figure out this unity thing if it’s even possible.

 Because we seem to be divided about everything. Even within families and communities and local churches where we do know and love each other, we can’t agree. And then you have other families and other areas of the state or the country and other churches in our denomination and outside of our denomination and churches around the world and it’s even harder to communicate and come to a place of unity. It doesn’t matter what it is really, what to wear or what kind of music or the color of the church carpet or someone sitting in our seat or politics or moral issues, or how to read the Bible or how to live out what we believe…the list of what divides us, and what often makes us act in very unChristian ways goes on and on.

 Jesus said our unity would be a powerful witness to draw more people to know him and God’s love through him. But too often our division and what divides us has had the opposite witness and pushes people away from knowing God’s love in Jesus.

 So how do we begin to understand and live into the gift of unity, even in the midst of disagreement and division?

 I think we have to step back and first realize that we don’t have all of the answers. That’s why it’s called faith. We have faith that God will help guide us to live out our faith in unity with all believers each day and in each generation. But we realize that we may each be guided by the Holy Spirit to do that a little differently, day by day, and from generation to generation, place to place, situation to situation.

 We have to remember the one thing that is constant: God’s passionate desire to be in relationship with us, despite our sin, stubbornness and desire to always go back to old habits and ways of thinking that are the most comfortable, and our desire to be right and to argue about it. God loves us so much that he finds a way to go around all of these things.

 And that is the incarnation—Jesus, God and grace in the flesh. Lucy Lind Hogan writes, “But the mystery of the incarnation is that God desired unity with us so much that God became one of us. And in that moment we were drawn into the oneness of God.”

 We were drawn into the oneness of God not because God agreed with us, not because we finally got it right. It was only because of God’s love—expressed through grace in Jesus Christ.

 If we’re going to live into the gift of unity that Jesus gives us and calls us to and dies and rises again to make possible for us, we have to take on the same sort of thinking as God—that what comes first, above all else, is grace and love, valuing each other as brothers and sisters and putting that relationship above everything else.

 Janet Hunt shares about being surprised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book, ***Life Together***. She thought it would be a book about the ideal Christian community where unity is lifted up as everyone thinking alike and getting along. But actually, she writes, he was highly critical of this kind of idealized unity because people often like the idea of Christian community more than the reality of Christian community and the people in that community.

 True Christian community, unity, life together, is different. It happens only when we come together as real people to a group of real people understanding the realities of our brokenness, our differences, and our need for grace. Unity only happens:

-when we are disillusioned with others and even more, ourselves

 -because only then do we truly comprehend that we need grace and they need grace, that we all need grace, even on this topic even where we think we are very right

 -when we realize that there might be more than one right answer

 -when we allow that we might both be wrong

 -when we admit that even if we’re right we might live it out in the wrong way

 -and that even if we’re wrong, we might live it out in a way that God can use for good

 -when we realize that even in the most loving relationships, there will be disagreements

 and squabbling

 -that not any one of us can see the whole picture

 -that none of us can do it on our own, we all need God and grace and each other

 If we can accept these truths, we might just have a chance. As Hunt reflects on Bonhoeffer’s words, she says, “It is in our differences, in our struggles, in our hurts that we encounter and receive God’s grace and gifts most completely. It is then that I am able to see Christ in my neighbor. It is then that I am able to be loved in spite of myself. It is then I know most deeply my own need for God.”

 What a powerful witness, when we meet those Christians we don’t agree with and yet welcome them as brothers and sisters in Christ, when we receive them as those who will help us to understand and practice grace more profoundly. What a powerful witness when we can appreciate each other as a gift rather than to vilify and undermine and exclude as enemies. For we are all one body in one Lord, even when we feel as different or as opposite as the right hand and the left, the head and the feet, the elbow and the nose.

 The unity of body of Christ is based in grace, grace that is wide and deep and unending. We don’t all have to be alike, we don’t all have to agree. Remember in John 14, Jesus said, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms.”

 But we do have to choose to live in the Father’s house. We do have to figure out how to live in the same house, even with someone who we completely disagree with. Grace is learning to live together, not locking each other out or making life miserable for each other. Grace is not moving out if they move in.

 John Wesley put it so eloquently when he said, “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding the smaller differences.”

 Today I invite you to bring to mind someone, or a group of people who are part of the body of Christ that you have been tempted to exclude or vilify as an enemy. I invite you to see them as a child of God, as a part of the body of Christ, and as someone who might help you to see Christ and understand his grace more clearly and deeply.

 And when it seems hard, know that Jesus has been praying for you and this unity for over 2,000 years and he’ll keep praying for all of us, that we may be one in him so that we can see God’s glory and others will know him because of our powerful witness of his grace and love.