

“That All May Be One”

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Text: John 17:1-11

I grew up Baptist. And we had a saying, “If two or three Baptist are gathered together, there will be a split in the midst of them.” It wasn’t until I went to college with a lot of Baptists when I found out that it’s kind of a source of pride. Many Baptists see church splits as a growth strategy. It enables them to build two churches instead of one. And there is some logic to that.

Then, I became Presbyterian and found out pretty quickly that the Presbyterians like to split off too. Historically, we split over doctrinal issues, like whether we will force pastors to believe in literal views of a 7-day creation, the virgin birth, penal substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection. We split over how we read the Bible—whether we read it like it was written without error, by the hand of God. Or if we see it more as a sacred text that we glean wisdom from but know that it was written in a time and place when there was slavery, and wives were understood to be property. In our country, the Presbyterian Church has split off over slavery, women’s ordination, civil rights, and LGBTQ ordination, and marriage equality. We end up with all of these factions. We have had a reunion too. The northern Presbyterians and the southern Presbyterians were divided for a long time, and then they were reunited.

The main split that I have been through was a relief, to be honest. When the Presbyterians split over marriage equality, I thought, *Finally, the years of fighting, defections, suicides, firings, ordination struggles and lying were over.* It felt really good. Of course, I’m not naïve. It’s only a matter of time. We’ll something else to fight about.

Of course, individual churches fight a lot too. I’ve spent a great deal of time as a pastor, navigating arguments between whether there should be an American flag in the sanctuary, what color the carpet should be, whether we should have traditional music or more contemporary music, what hymnal we should use, how the bread for communion should be sliced, whether there should be a projector or no projector, and *endless* fights over the budget. By this point in my ministry, it’s really hard for me to get worked up about any of it.

Sometimes, the issue itself is of no consequence. People are working through their own traumas and dysfunctions. They bring those things from home to church, and often people in church are so busy being nice that we allow for behaviors that other organizations would not tolerate. Plus, there are bound to be power struggles when people work in community together.

Jesus knew all of this. Perhaps that's why one of the last prayers that Jesus prayed before he was executed was, "Father, protect them... Make them one, as we are one." Even though Rome was breathing down the disciples' necks, Jesus was as worried that they would destroy themselves with in-fighting. After all, Jesus taught that a house divided against itself could not stand.

Maybe it was because Jesus was looking at his own followers. When he walked along the dusty road to Jerusalem with them, he knew that they had always been competitive. He had overheard them, bickering about who had more honor, who was the favorite, who would sit on the right-hand side of Jesus. Jesus always reminded them that the first would be last and the last would be first. He wanted them to set aside their competition and power struggles.

Jesus saw Peter, who was impulsive and ready to unsheathe his sword even if it meant that he would be fighting alone against ten soldiers. Jesus knew that Peter would deny him. Judas would betray him. And then it would be awfully hard for the group of friends to get back together again. And so he prayed that they would be one.

And Jesus' words reverberate to us. They're words that we must hold on to, especially during this time in our history. Researchers say that we are more divided as a country than we've been since the civil war.¹ I mean, we've always been divided as a country. The sparring between two political parties is nothing new and sometimes it is a help, providing for competition and checks. What is new though, is the hatred that people on different sides of the political spectrum have for one another. That disgust, that ability to quickly dehumanize each other—that *is* new. Right now, the church is being used as a political pawn and we are incredibly quick to jump into the action.

In my lifetime, religion has been used to fuel countless culture wars in our country. Jerry Falwell started the Religious Right to fight the integration of Liberty University. And then the church has wedged itself into constant battles of pro-life versus pro-choice, complementarianism versus feminism, anti-immigration versus providing hospitality to strangers. Religious freedom has been turned into a weapon to fight everything from baking a cake to how we are going to protect the health and safety of our own church members from the corona virus.

Foreign countries create memes around our religious divides, because they know that they can destroy us through our faith. They understand that they may not be able to attack us on our shores because we have built up massive military defense. But they don't have to. Because a house divided against itself will fall. People can easily use religion to pit neighbors, faith communities, and even families against one another.

Politicians use religious issues to form their base. And too often religious people will follow, unthinkingly, into just about any fight.

¹ <https://www.ap.org/explore/divided-america/>

Now, am I saying that we can't talk about politics? Of course not. You probably cannot spend five minutes with me without hearing my opinion on some political issue. I have opinions. I am not saying that we should put our opinions aside, or that we should not have anything to say about what is happening in society. We should always fight for justice. But I also know that I have the tendency to believe that I am always fighting for the side of justice, I am always on the side of right, and sometimes my side is absolutely wrong.

This week, church openings became our newest religious battle. Some churches believe that the government should not be restricting their right to gather. Other churches think that federal guidelines that go against a governor's proclamations will put undue pressure on the pastor, and it will put the safety of their congregants in jeopardy.

In our church, the session makes these decisions, and we are weighing all of our options. We have decided to stay closed for now, and we are working on a detailed plan that will (hopefully) ensure our safety when we gather again. I have opinions on all of this. I believe that my side is absolutely right. But then, when I was talking to a friend about a church that decided to open up, because the leaders of the church thought that the coronavirus was a liberal hoax, my friend said, "Good. Maybe they should all just die."

I was shocked. *We've gone too far.* On both sides. And we need to wake up and realize how we are being used as pawns by political forces, media ratings, Facebook algorithms, and even foreign governments.

But just as religions can be the problem, we can also be the solution. We can start listening to one another. We can begin to humanize one another, hearing one another's fears and resentments. We can understand that most of us are not solidly red or blue, and we do not simply parrot talking points. But most of us have a complex array of opinions. We can begin to pray, "Make us one." I'm not saying that we must give up our opinions. But we must have respect for one another.

We know that we are going to have huge challenges as a country in the years to come. As we find a vaccine, as we distribute health resources, as we rebuild our economy. And in all of this, may we use our faith, not as a weapon to blindly bludgeon one another. But may we use our faith to be united in love and care and compassion for one another.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Sustainer. Amen.