

EXODUS 17:1-7

PSALM 78:1-4, 12-16

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13

MATTHEW 21:23-32

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty Sixth Sunday in Ordinary
Time

October 1, 2023; Year A; World Communion

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

One!

Sometime around the year 100 CE the author of the Gospel of John (17:21), the last in the series of the four Jesus tell-alls, echoed the sentiments of the rabbi who purportedly implored his followers living in the Johannine community “that they may all be one!” This scripture phrase has become a popular slogan of the United Church of Christ. In the late 1980s the Bee Gees had a huge comeback with their hit single One, with the powerful refrain, “Baby, you and I should be one!” Shout out to other Bee Gees fans this morning. As he endured his prison time in about the year 62 CE, the Apostle Paul wrote from his jail cell in Philippi, “therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other.” In other words, in the things that matter, spiritual things, the things of God in Christ, modeling the life of the human one in Jesus of Nazareth, faithful followers of the human one, is to find ways to live in harmony, unified in as much as humanly possible, being of one accord, yes, becoming and galvanizing as one! Building unity is a herculean task, a tall order indeed, a noble goal that the Church for more than two thousand years has proven to be impossible, Christendom failing to achieve major, even minor,

consensus in any and every theological way imaginable, with or without God's help. My original sermon title for this festival day, this high and holy day of celebration of unofficial liturgical import, was "Good luck with that!" Yes, how is that working out for all of us in this diverse, an often-toxic mixture of good and bad, ecclesial postmodern world? Did it ever function seamlessly? No! But my homiletical desire this morning was to do an uplifting, perhaps even an ecstatically exhilarating, thrilling reentry, giving an optimistic and encouraging point of view, ignoring at least some of the facts of the case, putting a positive spin on what is often a dire ecclesial reality. I really wanted, intended, to do that. I make no promises, however! The truth is not often kind and is often painful! **Today is World Communion and millions and millions around the globe are receiving good gifts of grace from low tables and high altars, different meanings attached to Eucharistic elements from the simple to the most complex, bread and wine metaphorical symbols on steroids.** Even so, this gracious sacrament has been hijacked by many, held hostage by some sectarian congregations that practice a perverse close or closed Communion, limiting those who can approach the sacred spread. Tribalism has always infected the best intentions of Christianity! **Yes, despite opinions to the contrary, we are all part of one catholic and apostolic faith, a universal expression of God's love revealed in Christ Jesus, But oh what a mess we have made!**

So, the question before us this morning as a congregation is both simple and complex as many questions of significant import often are, what does it mean to be one when the Church seems to have more expressions, more spinoffs, more manifestations and mutations than people? Churches today, as they have frequently done in past tense, seem to "grow" by division and multiplication, doing far more subtraction than addition. **As I thought about this sermon as I traveled the long and winding road from south central Florida to Eagle River Tuesday and Wednesday it occurred to me how appropriate it is for**

the First Congregational United Church of Christ to have its Annual Congregational Meeting on this day when we not only gather around the table, together as one, but as we receive the holy sacrament, sharing with untold numbers, gathering on a day that by design reminds us of the divine call to be one, to be united as a ginormous corporate body. World Communion is a calendrically undesignated but significant day on the Church Year calendar that should be much more, far more, than an opportunity to pontificate, to offer pious platitudes of Pollyanna lip service by those of us who boldly embrace this quasi-feast day and seek to live its biblical principles. Let us be frank and earnest this morning, two of my favorite names, the Church will never be one because it never has been. The belief that the early Church was unified in any, much less every, way, leading to the desire for many congregations and denominations to be a rubberstamped facsimile or model of the New Testament Church is nonsense, because it already contained myriad local churches, no bishop able to contain or control content, heresy quickly becoming a problem of epic proportions.

From its somewhat humble and definitely humiliating foundation, unceremoniously removed from the synagogues and Temple suddenly understood to be Jewish reprobates as a sectarian movement within the tradition, the Church prospered and promulgated a movement from sectarian roots to mainstream acceptance, expressions that from the beginning took many forms stressing specific and unique theological and practical emphases. The perpetuation of this myth has always been formed with the naivete of the greatest mythological error, redundancy intended! The earliest churches never functioned in lockstep, not even remotely pretending to abide a lemming-like solidarity. Perhaps the bane and beauty of our ecclesial existence, a staying power that has proven the pudding, stood the test of time, enduring and even surviving, yes, overcoming, centuries of conflict, schism, reformation, growth, and decline, is that, as a human institution seeking divine guidance, we are proving the evolutionary

processes that are inherent in our human being and doing. Nothing worthwhile comes easy, without challenges. Our divisions and divisiveness do not mean that Jesus, assuming to have said words like these found in John's Gospel at some point, was naïve, out of touch, that he lived in a dream world, ignoring the realities that dictated his time and beyond. No, that is not the case at all. Jesus' hope and prayer for unity, for oneness, was the exact word needed then even as it is needed now, despite the low odds, the improbability, no, the impossibility, the very foolishness of making such an audacious statement. Jesus was not tone deaf! Even in the midst of death we are in life. Even in the midst of testing and trial, the darkest valley of our divisive rage, we hold fast to that which is aspiring and inspiring, to that which is noble, just, mercifully peaceful and graciously loving. Our motivations are not based on any empirical data, qualitative or quantitative, but are supported by our commitment to follow Jesus as best we know how, as best we can. And yes, that means different things to different people, different things to different churches, and all of us, no matter our perspectives, have only one choice and that is to deal with it, to live with it, balancing the discrepancies, the congruencies, the inconsistencies, while courageously proclaiming our witness, giving our testimony, to the best of our ability. There will be no ecclesial or theological equilibrium on the radar as we live and move and have our being as part of the institutional Church. Sometimes that means calling out that which and those with whom we disagree, that which we profoundly understand as wrong, but never ceasing to know that in the final analysis we are all Christian siblings, brothers and sisters of one faith, sometimes like it or not. That is our lot! Yes, ironically, or not, sometimes we Christian claimers do not even resemble one another. It is as if we are indeed cut from a different mold, manifesting different and distinct religions.

So, if we know this dynamic to be true on a universal scale, not having a prayer's chance of being one as part of a worldwide communion,

then what do we do in our contemporary here and now? Do we throw up our hands in frustration and apathy and accept defeat, acknowledging that this is the way things are and will be? Sure, we know that division will continue to be the norm, standard *modus operandi*, leading the way forward into an insecure and unknown future, parishioners leaving in droves, churches dying by the day, denominations downsizing to meet financial crises. Yes, this is a basic, a foundational truth, confronting the postmodern Church just as it has always described the ecclesial landscape, warring factors that have impacted all the churches throughout history. Two things! I believe we must proudly prophetically proclaim our perceptions, our interpretations and understandings of the faith handed down to us by our forebears in that faith, the Church Fathers and Mothers who birthed us, who sacrificed and were even and often martyred for the cause of Christ they held dear. Yes, germane to our contemporary, postmodern, setting, those whose perspectives are radically different from our own will continue to speak their truth as is their right. Same with us! Besides, everybody has the right to be right and wrong! There will be no end to our collective positioning on theological and societal issues. But closer to home, and today's Annual Meeting offers us a fabulous functioning tableau, a working model living our vision of the Church that might somehow enable us to be one, let us find and count the ways, managing the polarities, at least and until the eventuality of eternity beckons, the dawn of a new day in which God's rule and reign will ultimately prevail and we are forced by grace to be one, love mercifully, delightfully and wonderfully, conquering all and all of us. We will not be, will never become one as a worldwide communion of saints on earth, the presumed utopia of an ecclesial global village, but in this sacred space, every time we meet in the right here and now as this gathered community as the sacred people called to unite as one as the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River, Wisconsin, we can indeed be one if we choose to be, and yes, we so choose to be. We must continue to find ways to strive for that sometimes-evasive goal, to

grasp that often illusive diamond in the rough, a pearl of great price. We, as a local missional church, can model how to be in fellowship with one another, even when we disagree on matters, significant and trivial and everything in between, which we sometimes will. We talk a lot about disagreeing without being disagreeable because that is so hard to achieve when matters come before us that seem larger than life or of substance beyond the threshold of our comfort zones. We know the unfortunate results of ultimatums and lines in the sand. Yes, the Church has a history.

So let us do our best to be a counter intuitive, counter cultural community within a global ecclesial community that is as vast as the world. Let us stay in conversation in our little corner of it as we seek to build God's realm in this sacred space, a congregation committed to be in relationship knowing how difficult and fragile all human relationships can be and are. Let us agree, that while oneness is a pipedream of epic proportions guiding the Church in all its largesse, that we, within the local confines and the unlimited parameters of our sphere of influence, will model the hope once expressed within the Johannine community, "that they may all be one!" Who knows? This kind of interdependence might just catch on and catch fire for some or perhaps even many or maybe most. Pipedreams and prayers live! Who knows? What if this kind of egalitarian approach, a desire of faithful hearts and minds, might somehow miraculously become popular, at least to the point of establishing a baseline of Christian civility, indeed a Church anchored by the one thing, uh person, Christ Jesus, who is our anchor, the one who we all, no matter our stripe, our clan, claim to follow, no matter our theology, no matter our denominational or sectarian tribe? Even so, in the final analysis we are responsible for and to ourselves and our love for one another, our agape, always beginning at home, right here and right now in this holy setting.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to be one despite the limited odds of such an extravagant idea! For such a time as this! Amen and amen.