

So That We May Be One
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: John 17:1-11

Imagine this communion scene: people have come from east and west and north and south, to be gathered in one place; black and white and red and yellow, men and women and children, young and old, united by shared devotion and common love. They have come to eat and drink and remember. There is laughter and there are tears, as past events are recalled and future hopes expressed. Most of the people gathered there are strangers to each other, yet no one is a stranger; simply being there guarantees a welcome. Voices are raised in joyful shouts of praise and thanksgiving. No one wants the moment to end.

A peek at the Kingdom of God? Well, not exactly. Try "the Jake" three weeks ago as the Indians played their home opener, and fans came together on sunny spring afternoon with the high and heady hopes born by the prospect of one hundred sixty games as-yet-unplayed stretching before them. The jumbo-tron lit up with scenes from past seasons, golden moments of victory and players who have passed from the scene. Yet in some ways it was a kind of "communion" because we were united around something that spanned our differences, and made strangers act like friends.

Moments like this are made all the sweeter by their rarity. Our world, our communities, our churches are fractured. We are divided by differences and increasingly suspicious of those we deem "outsiders." The destructive rancor of last Fall's national election has continued, with Republicans and Democrats alike engaging in the politics of division, to the detriment of the country. Our own city, characterized by a decaying urban core and sprawling exurbia, has so far failed to embrace a regional vision. The inner ring suburban cities have sometimes reacted to the social realities of Cleveland with fear, seeking to close off our communities, to keep out "those people" who are perceived as threats. The strict residency requirement imposed by City Council on the Boys and Girls Club our congregation is developing in the former Heights Presbyterian Church building on Lee Road offers disturbing evidence of this. Restricting club membership exclusively to Cleveland Heights youth sends an unmistakable message to kids who live in the wrong zip code: stay away!

A ballgame is a poor substitute for a genuine sense of community day in and day out.

Our gospel reading addresses the fear that undercuts community. Cast in the poignancy of the last supper Jesus spends with his band of disciples, the context is one of confusion and apprehension. The text for today is a brief portion of a much longer prayer of intercession delivered by Jesus. In it he prays for his followers—for their protection, their unity, their steadfast future after he is gone. The prayer is addressed to God, but the once and future church is invited to hear and take heart. Listen then for the Word of God to the people of God in the reading from the gospel according to John in the seventeenth chapter at the first verse (found on page 111 of the pew Bibles if you wish to read along). [JOHN 17:1-11]

Today we are celebrating the Church's sacrament of communion, a reminder that we are united with Christians throughout the world. At least in theory. In practice, we are divided by denomination, theological perspective, and still to a great extent by race and social class. There are few places where these divisions come more sharply into focus than at the Lord's Table. Who may gather here...and who may not. On the face of it, Presbyterians may seem to have it right: we practice "open" communion; welcoming all Christians to eat the bread and drink from the cup. But are there brothers and sisters who might find it difficult to gather here at all? How well do we welcome people who are different from us? And how deeply do you and I accept the communion with others offered us in this meal?

In his last earthly hours, Jesus prayed for the church's unity, *so that they may be one*. His intention is for his followers to experience the same sense of communion, of intrinsic connection that describes his own relationship with God, *so that they may be one, as we are one*. Jesus understood the realities that make unity difficult; he himself had faced threats from powers that had tried to divide and conquer. He prayed for their protection from such forces, knowing that such unity can never be assumed in human communities. There is too much that threatens it; too many factors that keep us apart.

In fact, the unity of the Christian church will never be found in our unanimity. We are not called together to be the same; to look alike and think alike, to vote as a single bloc; to voice one perspective and declare one truth. Jesus reflected the glory of God by revealing a different way. In his ministry he demonstrated that community is built when people discover that what they have in common is greater than all their differences. With Jesus, we learn that our salvation is linked to the

salvation of others. Jesus welcomed the ones others had declared unworthy: the poor, the seekers, the sinners, the children. The kingdom of God is comprised of ones we least expect and brings together “insider” and “outsider,” haves and have-nots, us and them....friends and strangers, even enemies.

Jim Wallis is founder and editor-in-chief of *Sojourners*, a Christian nonprofit organization whose mission is to offer a voice and vision for social change by lifting up the biblical connection between social justice and spiritual renewal. His recent best-selling book entitled *God's Politics* challenges the church to help reconcile the deep divisions in our national life and reclaim a sense of community. The book's subtitle gives a tantalizing clue about how to begin: *Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it*. Wallis believes the Church possesses the transcendent values that expose the inadequacies of sharply partisan politics on either side of the aisle. He calls for people of faith to help a divided nation find common ground by moving to higher ground, by emphasizing personal spirituality *and* social responsibility and resolve never to separate the two. *Our private religions have failed, he writes, but we must not lose a personal God. Instead of trying to strike an elusive "balance" between private piety and the social gospel, we must go to the heart of religion itself in which a personal God demands public justice as an act of worship. [Wallis, God's Politics, p. 40]*

Despite the church's struggle to find its own unity, I believe we have this gift to contribute to heal the painful breaches that threaten all human communities. Jesus breaks down the walls we have so carefully constructed and uses the stones to make a table, with room around it for all who will join him there. Jesus risked everything for God's kingdom. We know the rest of the story: the religious and civil leaders of Jesus' day were finally successful in getting his death. But in the Lord's Supper, that death becomes remembered as a doorway to life. A sign that nothing—no difference, no disagreement-- nothing can ultimately separate us from the love of God and unity with God's people. Our fears can be relieved because we see that we are not simply left with the best of human possibilities, but with the very presence and power of God. Here we eat and drink and experience the living Lord, even though we live without his physical companionship. We are nourished not only to tolerate differences, but embrace them; not only to welcome strangers, but to go out and invite them in! In broken bread and poured-out cup we find our broken bonds restored, our fractured lives mended. Imagine: *People have come from east and west and north and south...black and white and red and yellow....men and women and children...young and old...of every human condition...united by shared devotion and a common love....no one is a stranger.* Communion.

East Africans have a saying that if you want to travel fast, go alone. But if you want to travel far, go together. Friends, we have a long way to go before the Kingdom of God comes "on earth as it is in heaven." We have some distance to travel on the journey toward embodying the beloved community within this congregation. Won't you join us? We need you; God needs you...so that we may be one.

TO JESUS CHRIST, WHO LOVES US AND FREED US FROM SIN BY HIS CROSS
AND MADE US TO BE A KINGDOM, TO HIM BE GLORY AND POWER
FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor