

So, I know that we've celebrated Easter already, but we need to get in our time machines for a minute and go back to before Jesus was crucified, because that's the setting for today's scripture.

In today's passage, from the Gospel of John, Jesus is praying while at the Passover table with his disciples.

There's a lot going on in these six verses, so I want to narrow the focus a little bit and pay close attention to verse 20 and the beginning of verse 21, in which Jesus says, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup>**that they may all be one.**"

Emphasis on that last phrase, *that they may all be one.*

These 6 words have particular significance for us, as members of the UCC, because it's our denomination's motto.

If you take a look at the cover of your bulletin and you see our logo, you'll see those words along the bottom, that they may all be one.

Now, us UCC'ers we get a little big for our britches sometimes, and we think that we are Christianity's superhero denomination and we've come to fix everything.

This mindset reminds me of a cartoon that I saw recently.

It depicts a teacher of the new member's class, and he is explaining all the Christian denominations and groups throughout history with a giant chart on the wall.

And then, the teacher circles our new denomination and says, “so this is where our movement came along and finally got the Bible right.”

And a student responds, “Jesus is so lucky to have us.”

Well, I am here to tell you this morning that this is not true.

The UCC is not the culmination of Jesus’ hopes for humanity as stated through the prayer he offered during his last night on earth.

And there are some other misconceptions about this phrase that I’d like to clear up.

Not only is Jesus not specifically laying the foundation for the UCC, he also isn’t telling everyone to become a Christian.

I don’t think that when he prays that ‘we might all be one’ that he’s even hoping we will agree or even get along.

He’s also not praying for us to find the lowest common denominator of things that we have in common and then work together from that place.

I name what I don’t think Jesus’ intentions were, for two reasons.

First of all, if we discuss what we don’t think he was trying to communicate, maybe we’ll get to the nugget of what we *do* think he was trying to communicate.

And second, when a text has been irresponsibly interpreted for generations,

it's important for us to acknowledge these ubiquitous interpretations before we forge ahead and search for an alternate truth.

And the reality is that these few verses have been used for centuries for the purposes of evangelism.

People try to draw folks into the fold of Christianity, by saying that we all need to be one through our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

Okay, so this doesn't really sound like the UCC style, so why the heck is it our motto?

Well, a little history for your pleasure... when the UCC was formed back in 1957, it was because two different denominations which had roots in four different denominations, decided to unify and become one Protestant group.

Going from 4 groups, to 2 groups, to 1 group, is pretty significant within Christianity when throughout most of our history, we've spent the majority of our energy splintering and dividing.

And these four groups, which are our UCC predecessors, had very different backgrounds.

Some were primarily English-speaking, others were primarily German-speaking, some traditions came from a more upper-class, rural context, while other traditions came from a more working-class, urban context.

And they had different organizational structures.

Some groups, like ours, the Congregationalists, believed that churches should be autonomous.

Other groups were much more hierarchical and thought that the regional and national governing bodies of the church should have a greater influence on the operations of the local churches.

So finding common ground among these disparate groups wasn't necessarily the easiest task.

But they were able to do it because those visionary leaders who orchestrated this merger believed and knew that we are better and stronger together than we are apart.

They knew that the unity of the church is not of its own making.

It is a gift from God.

And while we realize that expressions of our unity are incredibly diverse, the common thread running through it all is love.

Another one of the UCC's slogans is, *"In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity."*

The unity that we seek doesn't mean that all points of view are uncritically accepted, but that we must agree upon which aspects of the Christian faith and life are essential.

We are not saying that the answer to all of Christianity's divisions is the UCC, but that if the Christian faith is to continue as a force for good on this earth, then we have to stop splintering and dividing.

While our church is the product of a unification of several denominations, it's not happening only among us.

The Catholics and the Russian Orthodox are finally starting to play nice together as well, after dividing about 1,000 years ago.

When our denomination was formed, it wasn't expected that all traditions would blend into the UCC, only that this was setting the stage for further collaboration and cooperation in the future among different religious groups.

We were founded as a uniting and united church, hence our name, the United Church of Christ, and why this passage from the Gospel of John was chosen to be our motto.

And I definitely don't think that our predecessors chose this passage with the expectation that all people in the world would become Christian.

Remember, Jesus isn't giving us instructions.

This scripture is not a list of to-do's before he dies.

He's not saying, go forth and make everyone a Christian, in fact Christianity didn't even exist during his lifetime.

Jesus is praying to God.

He is NOT talking to the disciples.

He's sitting at the Passover table, amongst his discordant group of followers, realizing it's probably his last night on earth with them.

I sense some desperation in his tone:

‘after I am gone, I ask not only on behalf of these complex and disagreeable people at this table with me,

but on behalf of all those who are yet to come who will believe in us and yet will also disagree and argue and fight,

O God, may they know that they are all one.’

That’s my version.

He wants us to know that despite our disagreements and inability to get along in matters religious and secular,

that we might know we are all created in the image of God,

that we are beloved, that we are all united through God,

that we are all worthy because of God’s love for us,

and for heaven’s sake, may we one day be smart enough to realize this and wise enough to act on it.

If Jesus wanted us all to be a specific kind of Christian with certain doctrines or sacraments or architecture or prayers, he could’ve left us that information before he ascended into heaven.

He could have spent Eastertide setting up an organization, a liturgy, giving those disciples some rules.

But he didn’t do that.

He spent his time eating with them, healing them, drawing the wayward ones (like Peter) back into the fold.

He spent his time on earth after his resurrection showing them how to be one, by caring for and loving each other.

And notice that he isn't only praying for his disciples who are at that table with him, but for you and for me and for everyone who came after them as well.

Jesus must have known that if his followers had trouble getting along and heeding his message, that those to come might have trouble too.

*“Jesus’ prayer hangs in the space between earth and heaven, between time past and time present and time yet to come.”* (Lundblad, Barbara, WorkingPeacher.org, May 8, 2016)

And, this might be the hardest part of all of this to hear...

I don't think Jesus was praying for us all to get along or even agree or ignore all of our differences and be superficial in the name of “niceness.”

I think he wanted us to know that our unity is not of our own making, and in fact, God works through our discord, perhaps more so than through our harmony.

We might imagine an idyllic Christian Community in which we all smile and get along, but that existence isn't likely, and I am not sure that it's even possible.

I think our struggles with each other help us to see more clearly all that Jesus did for us and for the world.

Our warts and our hurts and our hurting of one another, these are the places where God puts us to learn from and to grow with each other.

It's in these experiences that we experience God's grace most fully, and we realize what's most important in our lives and the life of the church.

What matters is our ability to love one another and see the humanity in each other, even when we can't see eye to eye on much of anything else.

What matters is that we realize that we are one in Christ whether we agree or not, whether we like one another or not.

Because our unity is not of our own making, it is God's.

And I think that when the UCC was formed, that's what they were trying to get at.

That we are stuck together, and may we be wise enough to lean into the discomfort and pain we cause one another, so that rather than being torn apart by it, those experiences to draw us closer to each other and to God, so that we may all be one.

Amen.