

Jesus Has a Dream

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(John 17:20-23)

I was waiting to turn twelve years old and even more anxiously waiting for dinner one evening, when Ralph Abernathy stood in front of a mirror in the Lorraine Motel, slapping on some after shave. He was hungry, too, and was about to head out to a local pastor's house for supper.

Then, suddenly, Rev. Abernathy was startled by what sounded like a firecracker outside his room. He looked out to see his long-time friend sprawled awkwardly on the balcony. As blood oozed from a deadly wound on his friend's right cheek, Abernathy cradled the man's head and stroked his other cheek.

"This is Ralph, Martin," he said. "Don't be afraid."

But it was too late. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was dead. Ralph Abernathy's life would never be the same. And neither would mine, though I didn't know it yet.

You see, as a middle-class white youngster growing up beyond the burbs, Dr. King was not a hero in my neighborhood. To some he was a nuisance, to others a threat. So, I'm not sure why, but Martin Luther King held a certain idealistic fascination for me.

I remember that Sunday night church service when my pastor warned the congregation that King was a Communist. And with that *ad hominem* attack my pastor set fire to his own infallibility and nudged me out of the cultural nest. You see, I had listened to Dr. King, and he had always struck me as more of a Christian than a Communist. In any case, the truth is true regardless of who says it.

That experience helped me to understand that what is familiar is not always what is best—an attitude that contributed to twelve years of missionary work overseas and seven years serving in African-American church settings and now a little over a year at Washington Community Fellowship, which is nearly as culturally confused as I am myself. That's part of what Martin Luther King's legacy means to me.

But there's more. Not only did Dr. King's life shape my own, we share a common passion—a burden to see the Church of Jesus Christ in this country heal the wounds and right the course of our sorry, sinful, and sad history of racial and ethnic division.

Note what Dr. King said in his sermon entitled, “Paul's Letter to American Christians.”

“Let me rush on to say something about the church. Americans, I must remind you, as I have said to so many others, that the church is the Body of Christ. So, when the church is true to its nature it knows neither division nor disunity. But I am disturbed about what you are doing to the Body of Christ...

You have a white church and you have a Negro church. You have allowed segregation to creep into the doors of the church. How can such a division exist in the true Body of Christ? You must face the tragic fact that when you stand at 11:00 on Sunday morning to sing "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name" ...you stand in the most segregated hour of Christian America... How appalling that is.”

Dr. King delivered this sermon in November of 1956 at the Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Almost fifty years have passed, and when it comes to his indictment of the church, not much has changed. If “Paul” was appalled in 1956, I can't even imagine his reaction today. I think he'd be beyond distressed. I think he'd just sit right down and weep. Which is, I think, what God does.

Yes, we've done the right thing by getting together here today. Rev. Johnson is a kind-hearted, godly, and (I must say) a brave man. When he invited me here to speak, he didn't have any idea whether I could preach my way out of a paper bag. But this has already been a great service, and we want to reciprocate in the future.

Still, we need to keep our progress in perspective. If you finally make a touchdown when the score is already 54-0 you don't make a fool out of yourself by getting all jiggy and doing some kind of spastic chicken dance in the end zone. You hand the ref the ball, thank God you didn't get shut out, and get back to work. 'Cause we've got a lot of catching up to do.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a great influence on us all. But even though we gather to remember his legacy, we're not working to make the dream of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood a reality simply because it was Dr. King's dream. Rather, we do it for the same reason he did it—because it is Jesus' dream.

We get a peek at Jesus' dream in John chapter 17. You remember the setting. On the night of his arrest, Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Now, if you know that in a few hours you're going to be nailed to a cross and hang there until you die, you're going to be praying about your greatest concerns, not about some secondary matter. And it is here we learn that, like Dr. King, Jesus has a dream.

In the preamble to this prayer in the first five verses of the chapter, Jesus talks to his Father about himself and his own work. Then he turns the theme to his disciples. In verses 6-19 he prays for their protection, their joy, and their holiness. Then, in verse 20 the prayer builds to a climax, as he relates his dream for unity.

Notice that there is an important change in this prayer as verse 20 opens. He expands the circle of concern from his little band of disciples to "those who will believe in me through their message." That's where we come in. So follow me now through this fascinating passage, as we discover three principles that will guide us to the unity God desires.

John 17:20-23: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one:²³ I in them and you in me. 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.

1. Unity means one.

If I asked you for the simplest mathematical equation you can think of, you'd more than likely say $2 + 2 = 4$. But I've got one even simpler: $1 = 1$. It's hard to argue with that. There's really no calculation involved. If you miss that question you really do fail the test.

But as simple as it sounds, when it comes to the practical application of $1 = 1$, we often do fail the test. Jesus prays that we would be one. But somehow we interpret Jesus' *one* as "kind of" *one*." As a result, when it comes to the interface of ethnicity and the Christian faith, one does not equal one. But, unfortunately, "kind of one" does not work. It's like being "kind of pregnant."

So let's see what Jesus does mean by this call for unity.

What unity is not:

Unity is not the same as uniformity. We all have our peculiarities, and as human beings we tend to flock together like birds of a feather. That's not necessarily evil. Feeling a special affinity with some people doesn't necessarily imply a lack of unity with others.

God expects us to be different, because the image of God in humanity comes in many different shapes and sizes. We don't all think the same way, and we don't all experience things the same way.

But any difference among us that finds its roots in animosity, in ill will, in paternalism, or in the stratification of our value as people and as children of God must be called by the only name that fits it: S-I-N. And it must be pulled out by the roots instead of tolerated and coddled—the way we like to do. Unity is not the same as uniformity, but neither does unity allow us to be divisive in our diversity, nor to harbor motives that turn the stomach of Almighty God.

Unity is not the same as institutional togetherness. Sharing common structures can be a way of demonstrating unity, but unity has to start with the heart. Unity is not so much a thing you do; unity is the condition that results from true love. You can have disunity within the same church, and you can have unity between two very different churches. Just changing the sign on every church to read Baptodistpentepresbypalian isn't going to make them all one.

What unity is:

Unity involves all believers (v. 21).

²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

That means no splinter groups, no Lone Rangers, no segregation, no divisive denominational agendas, no cultural exclusion nor cultural exclusivity. Gal. 3:28 says: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

We, therefore, have an obligation to all who claim and maintain allegiance to Christ. Even if they fly a different flag. Even if they make noise when they ought to be quiet. Even if they’re quiet when they ought to make noise. Even if they don’t look like we do.

Nobody gets a pass on Christian unity because they think they’re better than somebody else. Nobody gets a pass on Christian unity because they’ve got a copyright on the Holy Spirit. Nobody gets a pass on Christian unity because they’ve been victimized. We are family, and we have to stick together.

Unity must be visible (21b, 23b).

Even though unity is essentially spiritual in nature, true unity can’t stay in the heart, because true love can’t stay in the heart. Theoretical love, theoretical unity require nothing of us but a commitment to self-delusion. But unity can’t just be a theory. It must be lived.

Why is unity such a big deal? One of the reasons is the impact it has on unbelievers. Look at the last part of verse 21 and the last part of verse 23.

^{21b}May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ^{23b} to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Now, let me ask you this: How is the world supposed to believe anything based on our unity if it’s only in our hearts? Are they supposed to psychoanalyze us? No. The only way the world can react to our unity is to see it demonstrated.

And just how is unity demonstrated within our churches? And more to the point today, how is unity demonstrated between our congregations? What could people around here

conclude about the body of Christ based on our history? If we're honest, I think we'd have to admit that it wouldn't exactly lead them to Jesus.

Let's go back to August 17, 1998. Then President Bill Clinton sat before a Grand Jury. They asked him a question, and the President's answer has become part of modern American folklore. I quote from that Grand Jury testimony:

“QUESTION: Your—that statement is a completely false statement. Whether or not Mr. Bennett knew of your relationship with Ms. Lewinsky, the statement that there was no sex of any kind in any manner, shape or form with President Clinton was an utterly false statement. Is that correct?

CLINTON: It depends upon what the meaning of the word *is* means. If *is* means *is*, and never has been, that's one thing. If it means, there *is* none, that was a completely true statement.”

Whether rightly or wrongly, this response has become the quintessential illustration of weasel-wording. Weasel wording is when you rely on a technicality of language to try to deflect attention away from the truth.

If we were put on the stand and asked, “Are your churches one?” what would we say? There's a temptation to resort to weasel words and essentially reply, “That depends on what the definition of ‘one’ is.”

But guess what? One is one. Unbelievers know that. And God certainly knows it. So, we need to start figuring it out ourselves.

Not only does unity mean one,

2. Unity comes from a common spiritual life.

Our unity must be based on a divine model. (21b-23a)

²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me.

We now come to what are, perhaps, the most challenging four words in the Bible: We pick up this passage with the phrase “that they may be one...” But how do you do that? Here are those four tough words: “...*as we are one.*” Kaboom! If we can hardly manage to get along, if we can hardly manage to forgive one another, if we can hardly manage to appreciate one another—how in the world can God expect us to be one as the Father and Son are one? What would that even look like?

The Father and Son are two persons, each with their own identity, but united in the same being. So, we obviously can’t attain that level of ontological oneness, that is, unity of being. Therefore, our unity in Christ is not *identical* to the unity of the Trinity, but it should be *analogous* to their unity. That is, our unity should resemble theirs.

Father and Son share a common love; they pursue the same purpose; they rejoice and grieve together; they work together, they commune together, and they enjoy one another. And that is the level of oneness to which we are called. But we can’t quite seem to get there. And that’s where Jesus’ dream and Dr. King’s dream coincide.

When I met my wife, Cindi, in 1976 her family was living in Bartow, a small town in the dead center of Old Florida. Her father had found work there after his retirement from the military.

I remember the first time I visited—and saw the fence. Oh, I had seen fences before, but never a fence like that fence. On one side of the fence was the African-American community. Whites lived on the better side, naturally.

In Bartow, in the mid-70s, nobody crossed that line to live on the “other” side. On a few occasions Cindi’s family tried to bring the sides together, and the result was not a pretty one. You see, the Ku Klux Klan kept a close eye on this Berlin Wall of ignorance.

This fence was a civic feature unworthy of a civilized nation, let alone a Christian one. But at least you could see the fence. Most places, and even in most churches, the fence is invisible. The demonic devastation of racial strife in this country has left Black Christians and White Christians on opposite sides of a great divide. And while the dividing line may now be invisible, the division is still all too obvious.

This division means that our unity—or, actually, our lack of unity—does *not* resemble that of Jesus and his Father. We don't share a common love; we don't pursue the same purpose; we don't rejoice and grieve together; we don't work together, we don't commune together, and we don't enjoy one another. Because the people over there are “other,” and we don't live on the “other's” side of the fence.

If we don't tear down that fence and cross over then there will always be fear and antagonism and distrust. We will always be two and not one. For we can never be one as Christ and the Father are one as long as we are “other.” And until we experience the oneness Jesus dreamed for us, his prayer remains unanswered.

Our unity must place us in the “in” crowd. (21-23a)

²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are *in* me and I am *in* you. May they also be *in* us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I *in* them and you *in* me. [emphasis mine]

It's kind of hard to understand what it means to be “in” Christ or for Christ to be “in” God or for all of us to be “in” one another, even though that is the unity we are called to emulate. If I take a plastic bag of the kind you get at the grocery store and put it inside another bag, then one is in and the other is out. It's hard to imagine them both being in one another. It's a slippery concept, whether you think about it physically or even metaphysically.

But it makes a lot more sense when you think about it *relationally*. And once you make that paradigm shift, you realize that we sometimes talk about “in” in a very relational way. We talk about being in the “in” crowd. But being in the “in” crowd doesn't describe where you are at. “In” is all about a relational identity.

And when we say, “I'm really “*into*” jazz, we're not talking about our location, we're talking about a connection of the heart that results in identification, engagement, and pleasure.

Now, I'm not saying that our colloquial use of "in" is just same as the way Jesus uses it here in this passage. But both are relational. We identify with God and he identifies with us as his people. We are engaged with one another and find pleasure in that relationship.

You see, unity isn't a charter you sign or a service you hold or proclamation you cheer. Unity is about us connecting to one another horizontally the way we connect with God vertically. And that requires, at the very least, contact—and then desire—and then a whole lot of love and patience. Until it feels natural. Until we are all really "into" each other.

That's where we must arrive to fulfill this dream of Jesus. As Dr. King said, "I may not get there with you. But I have seen the Promised Land." It's right here in John 17. So, I know what it looks like. I'm not even sure if I know the way. But I know where to begin—with my own heart, with the people I know, with the church down the street.

3. Unity leads to witness.

So that the world will believe that Jesus is the real deal. (21b)

^{21b}May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

In other words, authentic unity validates the dream and the dreamer—the one who prayed that we would be one.

Some things have a signature ring to them. You can just tell when it's the real deal. The sound of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle idling. Louis Armstrong singing. Bob Dylan. James Earl Jones. That dude who does the promo for every movie ever made, beginning with "In a world..."

If you buy original art, you want to check the signature. You want to make sure it's the real thing. And if you're going to trust your eternal soul to an invisible God you'd like to know that He's the real deal. According to Jesus, you and I have chance to be that authenticating signature on God's handiwork. But only if we are *one*, because that's God's signature stroke.

So that God's love in us would be proven real (23b)

^{23b}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.

People today are hungry for real, loving community, but they're skeptical. Marriages don't last. Families fall apart. And our mobile society severs friendships. So, a lot of people have been hurt. They'd like to believe in true love, but they need to see it first. Maybe they will believe that God can love them if they see God's love in us.

How does the world know that God's love is real in us? Simple. The unity of God's people. True unity proves that God's love is at work in us, because you can love others truly only if you have been truly loved.

1 John 4:19: We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

There is no more powerful demonstration of the gospel in American society than the multi-hued unity of the body of Christ—sisters and brothers of different colors and different backgrounds, people that the world just assumes cannot get along. Not in this America. And yet Jesus does something wonderful in us, something authentic, something that cannot be ignored.

Conclusion:

Yes, Christian unity was Jesus' dream, and it's still waiting to come true. It was Martin's dream, and it's still waiting to come true. It doesn't much matter that it's my dream, though it is. What really matters is that it becomes *our* dream, because Jesus and Martin have already proven that the dream cannot come true when confined to one noble heart.

You might be thinking, Okay, all this unity blah-blah-blah is well and good. But if you remember there were some people who took some other people as slaves. And that's kind of why we're in this mess to begin with.

Yeah, I heard about that.

It's true. People who looked like me are guilty of high crimes of inhumanity against people who looked like some of you. I'm ashamed of that legacy and deeply sorry for the incredible hurt that it has caused to people I care about, to the society of which I am a part, and to the testimony of Christ—a testimony that has been sullied by the blindness of so-called Christians who thought themselves enlightened.

We can't put the toothpaste back in the tube, but we as a nation have a responsibility to right these wrongs to the extent possible and to equalize the resulting inequalities. Those who have benefited from barbarism cannot escape the moral responsibility of repentance.

I accept that responsibility. I pray that the victims of this cruelty will pardon the seemingly unpardonable. And I hope that from repentance and forgiveness a seed of unity will spring to keep Jesus' dream alive.

And that brings us back where we started—to you and me and Maryland Ave. Unity is ours to create or destroy. But we will give an account to the one whose dream it was, and is, that we should be one.

Unity means one. Not uniformity, maybe not merger. But unity must be visible, and God has placed us in the same neighborhood. That's why Pastor Johnson and I are already planning collaborative efforts. Our unity, or lack of the same, will be noticed. At this distance we can't afford to ignore one another.

Our unity doesn't spring from all that we have to offer one another, though we certainly do have things to offer one another. Unity is based on our common spiritual life. We are called to be "in" one another according to the model of the Holy Trinity. That's not easy, but then again, neither was dying on the cross to make this dream a reality.

According to this passage, unity is the key to empowering our witness—that is, God's witness—in our community. How else will they know that Jesus is the real deal and that love really works?

I hope you're not disappointed here today. Being our first time together and commemorating Martin Luther King Day and all, you might have expected some sentimental rhetoric and a litany of other people's sins. That usually draws the amens.

But I came here to tell you that Jesus has a dream. He has a dream for the world. He has a dream for DC. He has a dream for Capitol Hill. He has a dream for you, and for me—and for us. That we would be one.

There can be no unilateral unity. This is a dream that we can only realize together. To answer Jesus' as-yet unanswered prayer. To say, "Here am I, Lord. Use me. Here we are, Lord. Use us."

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