

“Who Do We Think We Are, Anyway?” – Wholeness

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John 17:20-23

20 ‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

He always wore sweater vests and drank his coffee black. I visited Tom a few times while in college; he was a member of the church I served. I loved visiting Tom because even in his later years, he was full of life. His eyes sparkled with a sarcastic humor and he always had a new joke or two to share. Tom loved jigsaw puzzles and every time I went to see him he had a new one in the works, pieces set up and perfectly organized by color and shape as he worked to fit them together –some with intricate nature scenes or city skylines at night, some without edge pieces or building a 3D shape.

One day, as I walked into his home, instead of finding a single jigsaw puzzle nicely organized on the table, I found boxes of puzzles open and spilling out all over the room. Every square inch on the carpet was full of tiny little puzzle pieces. “Tom! What is going on here? Is everything okay?” I asked, delicately stepping over a mess of pieces and parts of an ocean scene as I followed him into the room.

“Well, no,” he said to me, his voice sounding weary. “You see that puzzle over there that I’ve been working on? It’s one of my favorites, an old one that my daughter and I used to do together. I got it out to put it together again, but look at it!”

I tiptoed over to the card table in the corner where a puzzle was nearly complete – a beautiful meadow speckled with flowers, in the center a lion and a lamb cuddled up together. “Do you see?” Tom asked me, coming to my side, “I have

the whole thing almost complete. It's beautiful, isn't it? But that one piece...it's missing."

Sure enough, off to the side, in the middle of what would have been a beautiful grass field, a gaping hole marred the picture. Tom had been searching for days for the missing piece, pulling out every other puzzle he owned to look through the pieces, sorting through drawers and cabinets and looking under beds. He was determined to find it—for the puzzle wasn't complete without it.

Complete. Perfected. Whole. "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world..." this is the first part of our identity statement as part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Today we look at the second part of the four-part series looking closely at our identity as disciples of Christ in the 21st century. Last week we explored what it means to be a movement: to be working and walking forward with a purpose, to be an organic gathering of faithful and seeking people with a vision of unity in Christ. We are a movement.

But we are movement with direction, for we are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. Like a puzzle with many pieces, all unique in shape and color and design, we recognize that we are a part of something bigger than our individual selves. We are part of a story that began long before our birth and will continue long after we are gone from this earth; a story of creation, healing, and hope.

In the first books of our holy scripture, the author of Genesis tells of God's creation of the world. Out of a chaotic nothingness, God brings forth water and land, animals and plants, human beings with personalities and loves and curiosities. Each day, as God put the finishing touches on the flowers and fish and fruit, God sat back and sighed... "it is good." In all of the earth's createdness, in all of humanity's perfect imperfection, God calls the world "good." As God's creation, in God's eyes, each and every one of us is good, created to be just as God intends.

But we forget that sometimes, if not far too often. The teenage girl or the young woman who looks at herself in the mirror and calls herself fat; the brothers who have been fighting for so long they cannot remember what started it all and thus don't know how or what to forgive; the inability of democrat and republican to

work together to find a middle ground; the disparity of rich and poor in our own city. We live in a world defined by fragmentation, division, and difference.

Last spring, the community Ministers Association (that I'm a part of) decided that we should probably have a mission statement. We are a group of 8-10 clergy from many different denominations who gather monthly for the benefit of the wider community. Although our faith traditions and expressions vary widely, we have become a close group of friends. But when a task force of a few brought a suggested mission statement to the larger group, something happened. We started arguing about precise wording about Jesus Christ. Some wanted to include parts of their denominational creeds and others claimed that would exclude their own faith. We were stuck, divided and angry. Finally, after an hour of argument and irritation, someone asked the question: "Do we really need a mission statement?" It seems to me, she said, that we were far better off before, when we didn't try to define ourselves but came together simply out of our love for God and one another. The room was silent for a minute, but the Holy Spirit's presence was suddenly palpable. She was right.

For so long Christians have been defining ourselves by what makes us unique and different (dare I say "right") that we've nearly lost our ability to even see what ties us together: God's love through Jesus Christ.

That's why it's so important to gather at the communion table as often as possible. It's so important that we come to this place, to sing the songs and hear the scriptures, to share bread and cup with one another – to remember that we are not alone on this journey of faith. We are on the road together and we belong to God.

One of the first Christian preachers, Paul, wrote a letter to the church in Corinth, Greece. The early Christians there were trying to form a community of people following the Way of Jesus Christ. They were trying to spread the gospel, to tell the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but something was getting in the way. Like too many churches today, they were getting distracted by fights over which preacher and leader they should be following. They were divided over different interpretations and variations of the story of Jesus Christ. So Paul wrote this letter in which he says in so many words: stop arguing. Stop letting divisions distract you. In chapter 3:22-23 Paul says, "whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas,"

(all different preachers back then) “or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.”

In other words, we belong to each other and we belong to Christ.

During one of Jesus’ final meals with his disciples, he gives a farewell speech and prayer. In John 17:1-26, Jesus looks up to heaven and says, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.” This farewell prayer has three parts: In the first part of Jesus’ farewell, he prays for himself and his work. In the second part of the prayer, verses 9-23, Jesus prays for the faith community and the future life of his followers, including us today. Then, in the final three verses, Jesus prays for a future of unity among God, the Son, and all believers. The thread that weaves throughout the entire prayer and connects it all is his prayer for the unity of the faith community, “that they may all be one.”

Jesus’ prayer is that his followers would know and understand that we have a part in the same unity that he shares with God the creator. By recognizing that we belong to one another and working toward unity as individuals in community—living in mutuality, prayerful agreement with one another, with respect, courage and grace—we model the relationship of God and Jesus. Through our unity with one another, our wholeness as a community, we experience a spark of the relationship between Jesus and the creator and catch a glimpse of God’s holy vision for the Kingdom of God on earth. Some call it God’s Shalom – a Hebrew word for peace and completeness.

“We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s table as God has welcomed us.” When Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, two of our denomination’s founders that I spoke of last week, when they first began this movement, the last thing they wanted was to begin a separate denomination. In 1804, in a document titled “The last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery,” Stone’s congregation willed that “this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large.” This group of people agreed to call themselves nothing other than “Christian” as a way to be united with all other Christians. Over time, as the movement spread ever farther, congregations of Christians realized that by sharing resources and building connections, our

mission and message could go further. Although we are now structured as a mainline protestant denomination, unity, mission, and God's vision of justice and shalom have always been the polar star that guides us. We Disciples have often led the way in ecumenical movements and inter-faith partnerships around the world.

“We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's table as God has welcomed us.” As we live and move in tune with God, as we come to understand that we are all individual pieces of one great big puzzle picture, and that we belong to one another just as we belong to God, we begin to piece together God's vision for a world of Shalom – of peace and completeness, where God, Jesus, and the faith community are all truly united in love.

But unity doesn't mean uniform. That is both our blessing and our challenge. Truthfully, we have often struggled with how to live united in our differences and we haven't always gotten it right. We are not all the same shape, size and color. We have different families and experiences, different learning styles and passions. Some of us are good at taking a leading role and others are crucial behind-the-scenes. Some of us have deep prayer lives and others a passion for mission and outreach. Some of us emphasize Jesus' power through his death and resurrection and others are deeply compelled by his wisdom and words during his life. Some of us read the words of scripture literally and others value modern interpretation. **Many of us are a mixture of all of these, but all of us have a place at the table with Jesus.**

We are Disciples of Christ: a movement for wholeness, a movement that acknowledges that each one of us and every human being is created whole – known and loved and called “good” by our creator. We are a movement for wholeness, a commitment to being united in our diversity despite the challenges that poses. We are and have always been a gathering of Christians committed to Christ and a vision of justice and peace. We are a movement for wholeness which, just like my friend Tom and just like God, seeks out every last and missing piece of the puzzle in order to complete the picture...

...to finally complete God's vision... to reach God's Shalom.