

In the Light of Being 'One' in Jesus' Name

By Judy Hanlon, Pastor

Hadwen Park Congregational Church

Worcester, MA

Once upon a time there was a Catholic family that moved into town, and they bought a house next door to a family that went to the Baptist church. One day the two families got together and went to a park for a picnic. And when they got there, the 6-year-old Catholic girl took the 5-year-old Baptist boy by the hand and led him down to the lake to go wading. But since their parents had told them not to get their clothes wet, the little Catholic girl figured that she was going to have to take her clothes off. And when she did, the little Baptist boy's eyes went wide open and he said, "Boy, my parents were right. There really is a difference between Catholics and Baptists."

I would like to talk tonight about a theme that has been in Christendom for centuries, "That we all may be one."

The gospel we read (John 17:20-26) is a short segment of a long monologue where Jesus tells his friends that he is going to die. It is actually in the form of a prayer---it seems that is overheard by the disciples. The prayer is about fundamental unity. Jesus prays to link those in his inner circle and those in the outer circle. The unity is part of a metaphor; humanity is to be one in the same way that God and Jesus are one.

So, how are we doing?

Nothing WRONG with differences, in fact differences can be interesting – imagine if we all looked alike – or if everyone preached like me! It is when we start saying that we are better than another RACE, another CHURCH, another sexuality, another gender...

Let me ask you a question that might help us understand why accepting differences in others is so hard for us.

Do differences in art, people, ideas, color---excite you or scare you? When a new song is introduced at church on Sunday – are you excited to sing it or frustrated because it is not familiar. When a brand new food is set before you, are you excited to try it, or wondering how you can nibble and dump it, so that the host does not know that you could not taste it?

I ask again.....do differences in art, people, ideas, color, food.....excite you or scare you? I contend that the reason that we are so unable to live together is we live in a spirit of fear. Including someone different than us – is scary.

How many people have seen the movie, "Remember the Titans?" It is a true story about race issues in the south. To me, it is the picture of this Biblical precept of ONENESS---that values and celebrates our differences. I challenge you to use victory over racism to enable us to envision victory over all sorts of divisions in life—in the church and in the faith.

It is 1971 in Alexandria Virginia. There is no unity between the races. We are a divided America. We are not one. In Alexandria Virginia, Football is bigger than God. And, the courts order a black coach to replace the honored and loved white coach, in Alexandria Virginia in 1971. Do you think that this brought unity?

Now, I am going to tell you the end of the movie. Because you need to hold this vision of ONE-ness in your mind's eye.

It is the state championship game, the Titans are in it and – integrated, with a black coach at the helm, they are undefeated. They are not winning this final championship game. They are losing. One of their best white players was in a car accident and is paralyzed from the waist down. One of their best black players is benched. The odds are insurmountable. Let me tell you the end. They win. They go on to win more and more games and in the year of 1971 in the United States of America---they win second place in the nation.

Now, I will tell you how they got there.

Here is the story.....here is the way to UNITY. The black coach is forced upon the school. The undercurrent is that he is set up to fail---so that the town can eventually return to the OLD way of doing things. The white coach has his ego crushed and makes plans to leave. Knowing that unity with the white kids without their beloved coach is impossible, the new black coach, Herman Boone offers Bill Yoast, the old white coach, the coaching position UNDER him---he can stay as the defensive coach. What would you have done? Well, the white coach, Bill Yoast, has dignity and self-respect he will NOT step down. He deserves to be head coach.

THEN---his boys revolt. In loyalty to him, they disregard possibilities for college scholarships and they boycott the team. Pay attention – it is here – at this crisis moment of decision for Bill Yoast, that the big ending becomes a possibility. Bill Yoast, the displaced white coach, understanding and loving his kids and the game MORE than his ego---takes a position of reduced standing and stays on under Coach Boone. Would you have done that? In the name of the unity of Jesus Christ and the church? Think of times when you and I have stood on what's right is right—by golly! At any rate, now the Titans look unified. Through grumps and gritted teeth they stand together? They are not one. But, it is a crucial beginning seed. The Titans send their high school boys off for two weeks in the late summer for training to a college in Gettysburg Pa.

There are two buses needed to transport the team. You can guess how they board. One bus is full of the white kids. And there parents are milling and mewing over near them. The other full of the black kids. And their parents are milling and mewing just outside the bus.

Do we board the buses of sameness in some metaphoric sense every day of our lives as Christ's church? We look so much alike – we bore ourselves!! One night at HPC we had a speaker, and 4 churches came to our fellowship hall to hear him. Every church sat together. We saved seats for each other and we waved to our own members as they walked in the door. Nothing wrong with that...right? But, what else could we have done?

Here is an idea. Coach Boone, the black coach, who knew what it had been like for his ancestors to sit in the back of the bus----knew that the Titans would never be champs and unified if they did not sit together.

He has a plan for oneness.

He named one bus the offensive bus and the other the defensive bus and players must board the bus on which team they played. And to add insult to injury---they had to sit with someone of a different race. Watch the movie. It is sad and hysterical. The body language. The fear. The ignorance.

In the church of Jesus, we should watch our body language. Can you identify your fear? Of a fundamentalist? Of a new liturgy? Of a gay couple? Of drums in a church service? Of someone sitting in YOUR pew!!

When they arrive in Gettysburg—Coach Boone tells them to room with the person that they sat with on the bus. Two and ½ weeks with a stranger—and of a different race!! Imagine sending your kids off to church camp simply without their best friend. These are kids. And, they are being told to do something their parents essentially tell them is wrong! Unconscionable!!

Coach Boone went one step further and to me----the lover of stories---this was the magic. Each boy was required to interview their roommate and stand in the lunch hall with a bunch of rowdy guys AND tell that person's story!! What was their daddy's name? Their momma's name? What food did they like? Who were they when they were not armed with helmet and pads and a play card? Who were they underneath?

And, they did it. They stood, 14 and 15 year old southern boys and mumbled about their roommate's momma, daddy and girl. The magic beings, friendships are formed. When kids saw each other as human beings on this planet---seeking family, food, love, hope, future, good grades, a girlfriend --the differences were softly brushed with the beauty of the human journey.

One night Coach Boone wakes them up at 3am. He tells the team that they are going for a run. Can you imagine the collective murmurs as they trudge through the black night, tired and confused? The fog of weariness and the darkness of the night fades as the handsome black man stops them on a muddy field and says to them, "You are standing right now on the land on which the Battle of Gettysburg was fought. 50,000 men (World Trade Towers had 3000?—do we understand our history for oneness?) died here that we might be free. We are still fighting that battle he says." ...Remember this is a true story.

The camera pans to black and white faces on which dawning and understanding of history and struggle and the fact that they are a part of something bigger than this team- (this church, this denomination, this country!) ---this soon to be, yet still desired STATE championship. (Keep that ending in mind!) The coach tells them that if they understand all of this---- they are already winners no matter what happens on the football field. Bill Yoast, the man who chose to step down from authority that unity might be restored, Bill Yoast's face is flushed with respect for his black counterpart.

At the end of football camp, the players have become reluctant partners, who know each other and celebrate their differences. Some have become friends.

We could do that. We could make sure that those who are not one with us right now---stand with us---sit with us. We could make sure that we seek out stories that we have never heard, to see if the Holy Spirit isn't enlightening us to see things a new way. We could decide to step away from power positions to servant positions—so that God's great game of justice might have its playing field.

On the night of the championship, everyone knew that none of them could do it alone. They needed the gifts and talents of each other. They benched themselves when necessary. They switched positions. They unified against the officials who had been paid to make the Titans lose. They changed all sorts of game plans---and asked each other to dig in---to find resources that they did not know they had.

What Coach Boone did one night in Alexandria, VA in 1971 has always been God's great game plan for unity in Jesus.

Are we telling our children and our confirmands to divide us up and name us and NOT have picnics together? Are we telling them that sometimes, in the name of Jesus, we have to forgo our power positions, we have to listen to new stories, and we have to lose so that Christ's church might be victorious?

Jesus continues to pray that we all may be one, though not the same.

Imagine our ending. It becomes second nature to share our tables and our pews, in Christ's footsteps we follow and REALLY listen to each other, in God's great vision of peace, we bench ourselves when we can no longer feel the spirit. Call me a bleeding heart liberal, call me a fool for the gospel, call me a Pollyanna, but I believe there would be peace on earth! I believe the lion could lay down with the lamb, and we would just not have anything to fight about – the human race would finally win, when we realize that we NEED each other to carry the ball over the goal line of life – now and again! Please Jesus!

Jesus is still praying for us. That we will continue to search for those places where we can come together with integrity and faithfulness, called by the Spirit to proclaim faith in the One, Holy God, through Jesus the Christ, who is larger than all our separate pieces.

What a relief! Amen

“Holy God, we are sorry that we allow differences to separate rather than to create interest and beauty. We are sorry that we seem unable to gather around our passionate love of you and dance in that liberty. You sent Jesus that we might be ONE and that the world might know us by our love. We are ashamed by our part in oppression, exclusion and arrogance in the name of your Church. But, with the energy of Christ’s grace, we promise to seek to include, to understand and to be amazed at the beautiful weave of life on this planet. Help us, O God, to begin again. Amen.

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord

And we pray that our unity may one day be restored

And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love

And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.