A Meditation on “One”

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“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 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.” —John 17:20-21

As Disciples, we seek unity among all Christians: to live together in harmony, wholeness, and peace. And we are not the only Christians who hope “that all may be one.” Other churches pray weekly for the unity of the church, and many work ecumenically for organic union or visible unity or common mission and witness.

But our own history of internal conflict seems to contradict our claim to hold “Christian unity as our polar star.” How can we say “we want to be one” when we act toward others as we sometimes do? Isn’t it ironic that a movement for wholeness has divided twice? And when it comes to congregational life, church fights are as common as mosquitoes on a Minnesota camping trip in June.

Unfortunately, we live in deeply polarized times. Conflict seems impossible to avoid in human communities, even in Christian communities that seek to do better.

Are we surprised? Families know how hard it is to share living space, despite the bonds of blood. Newly married couples find one of the biggest challenges of the first years is merging person and place together in a more intense way.

Ministry students at the Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt share a common kitchen. I see it as a laboratory for Christian living. It’s a challenge for ten people to cook and eat in the same space. A kitchen is a place where different expectations over what is acceptable (clean and dry) and good (organized and put away) clash with the realities of dirty dishes left hurriedly in the sink, messy countertops, borrowed (and missing) pots and pans and utensils, and overflowing trash—especially during finals week. Ministers-in-training are not saints! Inevitably, there is at least one student who causes problems (just like church, I say). How do you work it out?

It isn’t easy. Sometimes you can, sometimes you can’t. You try, fail, and try something else, repeatedly. Since students come and go, they might be able to wait for someone to graduate and move on. With troublesome church members, it doesn’t usually work that way.

Our United Methodist friends had a disagreement at their General Conference last June. It may lead them to division. There was criticism about the presiding bishop’s leadership during a particularly contentious vote. One delegate accused him of “telegraphing votes,” and another called him biased and said he should be replaced. His supporters said, “It was very unnecessary and hurtful,” and they called the session painful. Subsequent developments have made the conflict worse, and some Methodists are talking about separating. Presbyterian and Episcopalians and many others are fighting, too.

Are we surprised? Some differences and disagreements are too big, too deep, and too wide to be bridged or humanly mediated. Think: the American Civil War, which tore apart the nation, states, families, and churches, and is still having an impact. Perhaps there are times we must go our separate ways, and to think otherwise is foolish.

If that is so, our denominational dream of oneness is impractical at best, or, worse, a case of denial, impossible and naive. Or perhaps it is a dream only to be realized in the trumpet of that final day, when God “wipes the tear from every eye.”

Still, I wonder. I am a realist, not a pessimist. Is there not something more modest and achievable we might do here and now to bring Jesus’ prayer a little closer to fruition? In meeting the demands of our life together in Christ, I wonder if we would do well to turn to a different scripture, one coming a bit earlier in the Passover conversations of Jesus and his disciples in John: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

Church leadership and conflict management experts tell us, “Conflict is good!” But I do not agree. It looks to me as if difference in Christian community is inevitable, even deep difference, and is potentially good. It might generate healthy, creative tension and cause us to be edified. It might spark us and move us along in fresh ways. Conflict, however, might lead us to hatefulness. Conflict easily generates destructive interaction. Conflict is not love. You can love in the face of difference. Conflict deflects and dissipates love.

So: instead of worrying about “one,” I want to ask: Can we differ deeply without nastiness? Can we disagree, without dirty tricks? Can we even divide and go our separate ways without rancor, without casting each other into the outer darkness? I would settle for that.

I outlined this meditation in the spring of 2016, and I completed it on the day after our most contentious and divisive presidential election. Everywhere I hear calls for the nation to “come together,” and I understand those sentiments, but I am unconvinced. Lack of unity does not bother me so much. Lack of love does. Hateful treatment of sisters and brothers in Christ—that is not what Jesus wants, and it is not a given. Differences are inevitable. Lack of love is not.

I’m not talking about a congregation (or a nation) where difference is feared and avoided, where everyone is nice superficially, but where difficult matters bring out an evil spirit. This is not true and genuine Christian community.

I might never see a church or a denomination that is “one.” I’m ok with that, if only I can see folks treating one another with respect and dignity and generosity and care.

As Tertullian put it: “See how these Christians love one another.” That would be a giant step.

Questions for discussion:

1. How do you understand Jesus’ call to be “one” to Christians in our congregations?
2. Have you been part of a church fight? How did you act? How did others act? Is there something you regret or have a hard time forgiving? Is there something you wish you might have done differently? Have you ever sought reconciliation?
3. What is a deal-breaker for you in terms of your church participation? Is there one thing that would drive you away?
4. The Christian Century published an article in its September 14, 2016, issue titled “The Pastors of Richland County.” It discussed the life of a group of ministers in rural Iowa who were very different theologically, but who found a way to come together in some important ways as leaders and people of faith. You might read it as part of this discussion—see http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-08/pastors-richland-county.