“Staying Together with One Mind and One Heart”

by Dr. Delores Carpenter
Professor of Religious Education
Howard University

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.

—John 17:20-21

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

In light of the bipartisanship of recent Congressional activities, the 2016 Election and the campaign leading up to it, the United States of America again senses the deep divide in her political landscape. We can only hope that God will raise up leaders of reconciliation who can truly affirm the dignity of all citizens while addressing their most pressing fears and needs. The election in 2012 was also a very close race with a different outcome but symptomatic of the dissatisfaction of many citizens. The hard work of building unity cannot be ignored if we are to remain a strong country.

Nothing drains organizational and institutional effectiveness as much as disunity, combined with a heavy dose of discouragement. These elements breed indifference and even conflict. So much energy is spent in attacking from both sides that the real issues at hand and the needed work is postponed indefinitely.

As with the federal government, faith communities suffer in the same way when unity is low. Congregations become like soap operas, just inching along without needed change over many years; Perhaps beginning the arduous task of transformation means rebuilding trust and forming true coalitions of those with differing opinions who, nonetheless lay aside their differences and vow to work together on a common vision and specific objectives.

I was baptized and licensed to preach at St. Paul Peace and Harmony Freewill Baptist Church in Baltimore. As a teenager, I questioned why we had to have such a long name, especially the “peace and harmony” part. As I matured, I came to realize how very important that reminder was. I remember a time when the pastor preached on love every Sunday over the period of a month. He said, “This Sunday I’m preaching on the same topic as last Sunday. That topic is love. Some people have asked me why I am repeating this same topic Sunday after Sunday. Well, the answer is that I intend to preach on love until I see it exemplified in this congregation.”

Howard Thurman, the great African American mystic, university chapel director, and founder of the interfaith All Peoples Fellowship in San Francisco spoke most eloquently about unity. He said, “I cannot relate to you until I go down inside me and find you and vice versa.” In other words, there are ways in which we are the same. Our goal must be to find the common ground of our being and build our relationship on that. And from a vantage point of common ground, we can make tremendous progress toward mutual goals.

In John 17:21-21a, Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane at one of the lowest times in his earthly sojourn. We know that this because he prayed “Father, remove this cup… not my will but thine be done.” This was the night of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, and we Disciples, who hold high the Lord’s Supper, should be particularly interested in what Jesus did after the sacred meal was instituted.

He went to pray, near the olive presses. The olive press was at the back of the garden where he prayed reminded him that he was to be pressed on a cruel cross and sacrificed for his truth -- that he was the Son of God, called to save his people from their sins. As with the olives, what is yielded from the presses, olive oil, is more important than the olives themselves.

So, too, with Jesus. He knew that his death on the cross would yield something more important than his life, specially, the resurrection. He knew it so much so that he said, And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die. (Luke 12:32-33).

When Jesus prayed in the synoptic gospels of Mark 14:36 and Luke 22:42 “remove this cup from me,” it did not signal his unwillingness to die. For he had alluded to his commitment to death several times right before this night of his arrest. Rather, I believe that this moment of uncertainty represents Jesus’ doubting that his disciples are ready to continue his message and mission when he is gone. Had he taught them enough? Did they understand the core principles? Were they strong enough to endure the hardships to come?

Of all the fears that Jesus had about leaving his disciples, the one that jumps out in this text is his concern that they be one as he and his Father were one. He wanted them to arrive at a place of oneness that would bind them together forever, both to God and to each other. Perhaps the impending betrayal of Judas and denial of Peter were on his mind. Would this be a signal of the splitting apart of their close fellowship?

Jesus was so concerned that he implores God. Consider that Jesus is near the end of his life and realizes that every word counts. He knows that his praying days on earth, in his earthly form, will soon be over. And of all the things he could have prayed for the strengthening of his disciples, he prays that they may stay together with one mind and one heart.

We become the body of Christ when we minister with one mind and one heart. This is best exemplified at Pentecost when Christian believers were all together in one place and on one accord. Only then was the church born and only then were they ready to receive the power promised them by Jesus in Luke 24:49.

If there is a lack the presence of the Holy Spirit in our worship, in our deliberations, in our witness, and in our service, it is because we are not together with one mind and one heart. In this General Assembly, we pray that our oneness may provoke God to send a fresh anointing of his Holy Spirit upon the Disciples of Christ.

It is also my prayer that the new, Mission First initiative will bring us together and keep us together as we seek to continue the mission of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I hosted on mission gathering. As I was leaving the Capitol Area’s regional assembly, a woman stopped me and said how very much she enjoyed the activity of gathering the data. She said, “I feel like it was a great ice-breaker. We really started to get to know each other.”

I realized that what we experienced was not the culmination of data collection, but rather the beginning of self-discovery. How exciting! But it also means that we have lots of work to do and a way to go until our diverse body can be united. We don’t just want diversity. We want unity in our diversity. It’s a big task to achieve, but with the help of the Spirit of the Risen Christ, who desires to be with us always, we will get the job done.

As we watch a fractured electorate put its shattered political parties back together, may we be inspired to work together on the mission of Christ until Disciples of Christ become of one mind and one heart.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the impediments to achieving one mind and one heart within the Disciples of Christ?
2. What ethical decisions will move us in the right direction?
3. What future concrete action must we take to become one?
4. In Luke 24, when Jesus says, “remove this cup from me”, an angel comes and strengthens him so that he prayed even more fervently. When we doubt that unity is possible, can we call on the angels to strengthen us?