

## **One Church, One Mighty Church**

Old Testament Lesson Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

New Testament Epistle Lesson Ephesians 4:1-7

Gospel Lesson John 6:24-35

Sometimes I have trouble believing the Bible: “one faith, one baptism, one body.” Really? Imagine this was a debate topic and you were assigned the affirmative. Your mission is to make the case that Paul is right when he says one church.

If I was the debater, my opening feint would be to talk about food. What, you may ask, does food have to do with being one church? My brain has a direct connection with my stomach. I have my own Food Channel living in my head. Even when I’m preaching, a Lyle Lovett song is playing in the background: “It’s time for dinner now, preacher. Let’s go.” Have you noticed how much time the early church spends debating food? It’s like a biblical Food Channel. In Acts we learn that the first dispute in the church was over whether the Hebrew widows were getting more than their fair share in the distribution of food. In the church at Corinth there were too many cooks in the kitchen as food fights break out everywhere. I Corinthians 8 is a food fight over meat offered to idols in the temple. It reads like our current dust up of “To Mask or Not to Mask.” Corinth also had issues over the Lord’s Table. Paul indicates that the rich members of the church were drinking up all the wine at communion, so they didn’t have to share with the poor who seemed to have arrived late for dinner.

Paul claims that we come together to eat the Lord’s Supper. The church is about how we eat and drink together, but Paul describes it in high and holy language. We have trouble hearing Paul’s words because we have never experienced the “one” church he describes. One faith, one baptism, one Lord, says Paul. I am attempting to make the case that being one church has everything to do with the meal of the Lord – the sacrament of Holy Communion, the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. I’m sure you sense the division there between Catholics and Protestants, but I contend this is not insurmountable.

There's a movie called *Family Reunion*. The family was a contentious bunch. They scrapped and split and never got along. Yet, every year, they scheduled a party, a family reunion. At a long table, they'd all sit down together. But you couldn't help noticing the sidelong glances, the cold shoulders, the obvious slurs. Perhaps that

was the way it often was in churches from the New Testament until now. Though they gathered at one table and shared one cup together, they were at odds. We have always been a divided church.

I believe Paul is serious about unity. Seven times Paul uses the word "one". "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God." How many? One? In the Greek text, the word one used with Lord, faith, and baptism undergo a gender change each time: masculine, feminine, and neuter – *heis, mia, hen*. We should at least try.

Are there some baby steps we can take? When it comes to being one church, we are still infants. Maybe we just need an encouraging parent – a loving God with arms outstretched - saying, "Come on, you can do it. You can do it."

Baby step: "There's is only one God." There's not a god for each denomination. There's not a god that condemns homosexuality and a god who embraces gays. There's not a god for Pat Robertson and the prosperity gospel preachers and a god for mainliners. I am not suggesting an easy tolerance but insisting that we get our act together: There is one God – the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac. The Arabs claim there are ten thousand names for God, but only the camel knows the right one! Everything hinges on the one true God.

That wasn't so hard, so let's take another small step: There is only one faith in God. Our faith does not derive from Calvin, Luther, Wesley, the Pope, or Paula White. Our faith is through Jesus Christ. Trace your faith back far enough and you will arrive at the moment when Jesus told Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." You will eventually get back to the cross and to the empty tomb. John Calvin shouted, "There could not be two or three churches, unless Christ is torn asunder." There is only one Jesus; there can only be one church.

Baby step: "There is one baptism." Set aside for a moment that there are different modes of baptism; and remember that baptism is the door into Christianity. Christians baptize as the rite of initiation. This is how you become Christian. "I am baptized." All Christians can say this with confidence. Whether baptized by a priest as a two-month-old in a cathedral in New York or an eight-year-old in a bayou in Louisiana or a forty-four-year-old in a church, all Christians are baptized. Sometimes I will say to a total stranger in an airport, "I am baptized." Sometimes someone will say, "Really? Me too!" It's a start. Have you ever noticed that two strangers open conversations warily? They offer probing questions? Where are you from? What do you do? What do you like? They are searching for common

ground. So if someone says to me, "I'm from Louisiana," I have instant identification. "Get out of town, really?" "Where in Louisiana? And if they say, "Baton Rouge," they are practically kinfolk. It doesn't matter that they live on the other side of the city or that I don't know anyone in their family; we have established a common bond out there in that alien land of Atlanta. "I am baptized!" See, it's a start.

Now, let's add the exciting idea that the Holy Spirit gave gifts to the individual church members, at least partly to provide a way for us to be in unity. What a great word, "unity." One united church. Why not engage in an act of imagination that sees one church? Each one of us has been given gifts to make the church one. Do you get it? This is the mighty, mighty church of one faith, one baptism, one Lord.

What if unity comes through the diversity of gifts? Not beliefs, politics, status, family, or sexuality, but gifts? Well, the reality is that there are all kinds of gifts and all kinds of Christians. There is evidence that cultures have done a decent job of incorporating the gifts of others in certain, limited ways. For example, as much trouble as we have with race in this country, "soul" food from the African American community has found a permanent home in our cuisine. Same for Cajun food. People who know nothing about Cajuns love Cajun food. Restaurants will put the word Cajun in their name, add hot sauce to their food, and fool people into thinking that it's Cajun food. When it comes to food, the nation is diverse and enriched and our palates have been richly rewarded. We have done a great job of incorporating the food of other cultures. Thai, Korean, Polynesian, home-cooking, Greek, Italian, Mexican, --- on and on the list goes. There seems to be an Italian eatery on every street in Schenectady.

What if we could bring churches together the way we have brought our nation together around food? This should not be that hard. After all, we are a religion of meals. Our founding faith, Judaism, has more meals and feasts and festivals than we can count. One shared Passover meal should bind us together forever. It has always been about the food. Why can't we get "Fried chicken" churches together with lasagna churches? And vegan churches with steak churches? A bridge too far?

I have experienced Paul's vision of one church, but it was not at a church. For years I had services at local nursing homes. Each week I would lead a worship service at four nursing homes. This was back when I really had a lot of energy. I would bring the bread and grape juice and serve communion. There were folks from all denominations and no denominations in the worship. Maybe as we get older, some of our hard-core theological differences fade into obscurity, but I

noticed that almost every one of these residents received communion. They came hungry and eager to the table. It meant something to them that had enough power to overcome the fact that I was a Baptist, and they were often Lutherans, Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Pentecostals. There we were, fifty or sixty of God's children, living out last days in a nursing home, maybe feeling abandoned, but taking the bread in wrinkled, shaking hands, and lifting the cup in sheer praise to God. There we were one in the Lord, one in the Spirit, and one in sharing the Lord's meal. We don't have to check in to a nursing home to have this experience.

Let me give you two pictures to hang in the living room of your mind for later reflection. FBC Dayton and Christ Episcopal Church agreed to have a Sunday picnic together. It saved me from the annual fight at First Baptist over whether the picnic was going to be north of the city or south of the city. We had the picnic at Triangle Park where Christ Episcopal always had their picnic. We used the Book of Common Prayer for worship and real wine for communion. We did a lot of vibrant singing, confessed our sins, shared the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and ate a boat load of fried chicken. I didn't know Episcopalians could eat so much chicken and watermelon.

The second picture: In our partnership with Christ Episcopal, we worshiped together as one church for five straight Sundays. We used their order of worship. I preached 3 times and Father John preached twice. We had communion every Sunday. It was the best worship of my life. Couldn't we agree to and dedicate our lives to making it real: one faith, one baptism, one Lord, one church, one God? I invite your participation.