



## **ECUMENISM SUNDAY (DIFFERENT FAITHS WORSHIPPING TOGETHER)**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Charmaine P. Johnson, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Associate Minister, Victory Church, Stone Mountain, GA

**Lection – John 17:20-23** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 20) I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, (v. 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. (v. 22) The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, (v. 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.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Ecumenism is derived from the Greek words *oikoumene* (“inhabited world”) and *oikos* (“house”). Ecumenism Sunday is a day set aside to promote unity, reconciliation, and collaboration. Worship celebration services with ecumenism at their core encourage worshippers to focus on the universal nature of God (love) and the unity between God and God’s son, Jesus. This Sunday also encourages a complete disregard for any divisions that may exist among faith communities.

Rather than beginning at the edges (the location of our differences in polity, worship styles, dogma, denominational differences, etc.) and trying to move toward unity, ecumenism begins at the theological and sociological center—that all of us as God’s creation are inextricably bound to God and to one another—and seeks to strengthen our unity, not just explain or analyze it.

In African American faith communities, ecumenism typically refers to a “gathering of the community for one cause.” Many African American faith communities emphasize ecumenism and promote different faiths worshipping together not only on Ecumenism Sunday but on other days of the year based on themes and holidays, namely, the observance of Dr. Martin Luther’s King Jr.’s birthday, September 11 commemorative events, Holy Week services, and World AIDS Day. In addition, ecumenism is heightened through prayer vigils and special worship services when tragedies occur in local communities.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 17:20-23**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

Diversity is inevitable in our contemporary pluralistic society. Our culture consists of a plethora of factions that embody the potential to create schisms and chasms in our society. In the midst of all of our diversity, humanity is called to work together in unity. True unity demands diversity and is the essence of local and global community building. It becomes problematic when humanity makes the gift of diversity a global liability instead of a global asset, thereby creating factions void of unity and love. The mere existence of diversity does not threaten unity or present a contradictory claim to unity but beckons humanity into a deeper understanding of itself and subsequently strengthens unity through the activation of love. The overarching operating principle for all Christians must be agape love. Love, not our differences, should reside at the core of our innermost being. The motto of the United Church of Christ provides a succinct illustration of Jesus’ prayer for unity of the Church (“that they may all be one”): “In essentials—unity, in nonessentials—diversity, in all things—charity.”<sup>1</sup>

Love and understanding of our Creator God provokes the tearing down of walls that divide humanity. Howard Thurman’s address at Spelman College’s Baccalaureate in 1980 presented a challenge to all to hear the “sound of the genuine.” He stated:

There is in every person something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself. This is your assignment. What is your name? Who are you? Can you find a way to hear the sound of the genuine in yourself? . . . Now if I hear the sound of the genuine in me and if you hear the sound of the genuine in you, it is possible for me to go down in me and come up in you. So that when I look at myself through your eyes having made that pilgrimage, I see in me what you see in me and the wall that separates and divides will disappear and we will become one because the sound of the genuine makes the same music.<sup>2</sup>

An understanding of God, our Creator, informs an understanding of self. An understanding of self informs one’s self-identity and causes one to hear the sound of the genuine in himself or herself. Hearing the sound of the genuine in one’s self allows one to hear the sound of the genuine in others, thereby demolishing the walls of division and allowing love and unity to emerge and prevail.

Walls of division in this nation tend to fall fastest in the midst of major tragedies. Restoration and revitalization efforts in areas struck by natural disasters present illustrations of this in

contemporary times. These types of catastrophes evolve into catalysts for unity; they have allowed genuine concern for one another to prevail through moments of prayer, reflection, and the outpouring of financial contributions and tangible donations.

As this compact unit was written, additional recovery efforts were underway to assist the victims of Moore, Oklahoma, and surrounding areas of Oklahoma City in the aftermath of a top-of-the-scale EF5 tornado. In times like these, the walls that separate and divide people by race, political party, religion, and economic status seemingly disappear. In times like these, unity prevails, and non-essential, trivial matters are set aside. In times like these, tragedies allow humanity to grieve, struggle, and recover together, void of any prejudices, shame, or greed. In times like these human concern and unity emerge as supreme.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The final scene of Jesus' farewell meal with his disciples is the farewell prayer in John 17. This prayer is referred to as the high priestly prayer and is the longest recorded prayers of Jesus. This theological climax is positioned in the text at the conclusion of the Upper Room discourse and before the Passion narrative.

If one designed a sermon around this pericope, three movements or points would easily emerge, each one leading to our overarching theme of this unit—unity among believers. First, this high priestly prayer of Jesus illustrates the union of Jesus with God, thereby representing the intimacy of Jesus and God. Jesus speaks directly to God, with the eleven disciples participating only through the privilege of overhearing. This prayer is offered not as instructions to the community but as an earnest request made before God. It is also, of course, an example given for all disciples of Christ. John's proposition is that if the Disciples of Christ are one as Christ is one with God, then the world would become something that it is not—followers of Christ.

The prayer is not a selfish prayer that segregates humanity. Rather, it is an invitational prayer. According to Gerard Stephen Sloyan, it is a prayer for everyone in the world in need of the divine gift of the Father.<sup>3</sup> Jesus' prayer produces an opportunity for culture differences to come together as one in him.

In John 17:20-23, our Lord prays to His Father that all who believe in him through his word and the testimony of others who come in his name become one in him. Christian unity is the mission of the ecclesia which Jesus Christ establishes on Peter's confession (Mathew 16:18). It is the unified confession of the work and person of Christ that serves as the mortar that keeps the bricks of individuality and culture together.

Jesus' directives about unity among those who believe in him as Savior are included in verses 20-23 of this farewell prayer. He prays for unity of the Church in the present age and ages to come. He intercedes on behalf of believers in the faith community and widens the prayer circle by praying for all those who will come to believe based on the work and witness of the faith community. The ultimate aim of this intercessory prayer is for the world to believe that God sent Him.

Our love for each other is inextricably linked to the divine love of God and God's son, Jesus. Jesus prays that this unifying love will be so exemplary and profound in those who believe in him that others will be filled with the love of God and come to believe. This is a prayer that signals for every believer that he or she is to be a witness.

The second movement is a word of protection through the Father's name which has been given unto him, for those who are his disciples.<sup>4</sup> Our Lord prays for continual divine guardianship from the evil one. Within the scarlet thread of unity, God releases protection from the shadows of death that seek to infuse chaos and disarray.

In the final movement of Jesus' prayer, the writer records our Lord offering words of reconciliation to God, praying to the Father that the world may come together as a unified body under the gospel. In this Johannine prayer of Jesus, the writer envisions an ecumenical movement that unites a divided world under the banner of belief that God crucified and God resurrected one Christian community. Jesus prayed with confidence in his church to fulfill its mission to welcome all who believe in him, despite their cultural indifferences on any terms, anywhere in the world.<sup>5</sup> The gospel of Jesus Christ does not discriminate; therefore the church does not fulfill its mission if it does.

Do our work and witness reflect the unity and oneness that is reflected in the divine relationship between God and God's Son, Jesus? Is there intentionality to adopt Jesus' earnest desire in verse 20 ("that they may all be one") as a mantra in the process of making policy and procedural decisions that govern God's people? Do policies and ideologies further support unity among humanity, or do exclusion and alienation govern the decision-making process? Our invitation is to embrace this reminder of the ultimate illustration of love and unity represented in the divine relationship between God and Jesus and to allow this love to dominate ALL aspects of the walk, work, and witness of our faith community.

This prayer for unity by Jesus not only reminds us of the divine love and unity of God and God's Son; it also invites us to reflect on the witness of our faith community while concurrently undergoing a critical examination of our personal work and witness. Is our love for humankind directly aligned with the mutual love of God and Jesus? Do our actions toward humankind model Godly unity or do they divide, or even worse, are we lukewarm and indecisive?

If we embrace the love Christ has for us and desire that it reach others, as we are fueled and convicted by the Holy Spirit, the witness of the faith community will be more effective and our bond of love will consequently serve as a witness to the world. This can create a magnetic attraction to bring about change in the world, change with which God will be pleased and Christ glorified!

## **Challenge**

Ecumenism should not be viewed as an option but as a mandate based on God's demonstrative love for Jesus. God calls us into unity in the Spirit. Our challenge during these contemporary times is the live up to that desire articulated in Jesus' intercessory prayer—"that they may all be one." For if we are truly one, with a genuine and unconditional love that extends from heart to

heart and from breast to breast, how can we maintain a state of complacency when blatant injustices and societal ills dehumanize any person, anywhere, at any time? Love is something that we do; if we say we love God, who we have never seen, how can we fail to unite with our brothers and sisters who we see every day?

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage include, but are not limited to:

**Sights:** Jesus looking up to heaven and praying; the disciples and others overhearing Jesus pray; the location in which Jesus prayed;

**Sounds:** Jesus praying; mumbling and discussion by those hearing Jesus pray; and

**Emotions:** Compassion of Jesus as he desires that unity for believers; fear by those who worry that their work with Jesus may end up badly; and joy by those who completely trust Jesus and his teachings.

### **III. Materials That Preachers and Others Can Use**

#### **Songs**

##### **Koinonia**

by V. Michael McKay

Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJi5KkSFU5o>

How can I say that I love the Lord whom I've never, ever seen before;  
and forget to say that I love the one whom I walk beside each and ev'ry day?  
How can I look upon your face and ignore God's love? You I must embrace!  
You're my brother; you're my sister; and I love with the love of my Lord.<sup>6</sup>

##### **They'll Know We Are Christians**

by Peter R. Scholtes

Youtube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7\\_wHi0PNHg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7_wHi0PNHg)

1. 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 all unity may one day be restored.

##### **Refrain**

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

2. We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,  
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,  
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land.

3. We will work with each other, we will work side by side,  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side,  
And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride.

4. All praise to the Father, from whom all things come,  
And all praise to Christ Jesus, his only Son,  
And all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Jesus in Me Loves the Jesus in You**

by Donnell Lipford

The Jesus in Me loves the Jesus in You  
It's so easy, so easy, so easy, easy to love.<sup>8</sup>  
[Repeat 5x ]

### **Quotes**

“We inhabit a universe that is characterized by diversity”

—Desmond Tutu

“It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.”

—Maya Angelou

“Where love is, there God is also.”

—Mahatma Gandhi

“Hold firmly that our faith is identical with that of the ancients. Deny this, and you dissolve the unity of the Church.”

—Thomas Aquinas

“Love is a fruit in season at all times, and within reach of every hand.”

—Mother Teresa

### **Notes**

\*Special thanks to Rev. Gregory Hardy, today's cultural resources writer, for his contribution to the Biblical Commentary section of today's lectionary commentary.

1. <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/what-we-believe.html> (accessed 5 June 2013).

2. Thurman, Howard. “The Sound of the Genuine,” Spelman College, Baccalaureate, 1980. Spelman Messenger, Volume 114, Number 1, Summer/Fall 2000. Online location: [http://www5.spelman.edu/about\\_us/news/pdf/72867\\_Mess\\_Text\\_SF2K.pdf](http://www5.spelman.edu/about_us/news/pdf/72867_Mess_Text_SF2K.pdf) (accessed 5 June 2013).

3. Sloyan, Gerard Stephen. John (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 196.
4. Ibid., 197.
5. Ibid., 198.
6. Koinonia. By V. Michael McKay. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #579
7. They'll Know We Are Christians. By Peter R. Scholtes. Online location: <http://www.spiritandsong.com/compositions/578>.
8. The Jesus in Me Loves the Jesus in You. By Donnell Lipford. Location unknown.