At first it was just a family squabble. One group put Scripture above Church structure and called for change; when rebuffed, they protested. So, then the one family became two: the Protestants and the Catholics. But once the squabble started, it snowballed. It wasn’t long before the Protestants disagreed and turned disagreeable toward their brothers and sisters in the faith. And there was disunity in the body of Christ.

The prayer recorded in John’s Gospel is a prayer for unity. It is the Lord’s prayer for His companions and His Church. In this first prayer for Christian unity, Jesus prayed that His disciples may be “one.” Referring to this prayer, writer and speaker Max Lucado said: “On the last night of his life our Master did not pray for the health of the disciples; for the success of the disciples; even for the happiness of the disciples. He prayed that they would get along with each other.” Jesus’ prayer was for unity between His disciples and unity within His Church. So, how do we accomplish that? How do we bring about and work toward unity?

First, **it must start with us**. We cannot wait for anyone else to start. We must be proactive. We must take the first steps. We must stop doing and saying those things that cause hurt and continue the disunity amongst us. We must be the first to act to change things.

Max Lucado said that one day his wife brought home a monkey. His daughters were thrilled but he wasn’t; he had questions. Where was the monkey going to eat? His wife said that it was going to sit at the table and eat with them, just like the rest of the family. Then he asked her where it was going to sleep? And she told him it was going to sleep in their bed. Then he asked, “But what about the smell?” And she said, “Oh, he’ll get used to you, I did.” Lucado went on to say, “Before you comment on the odor of someone else, check your own odor first.”

That is what Jesus meant when He said, “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” Unity must begin with us. Unity must begin with our personal relationship with Christ. We must be one with Christ, first. Our lives must be knit together with His life through faith. And unity must be present in our congregation. Our lives must be knit together in love, through Christ.

Second, in being one with Christ, **we must pull together**. At a Midwestern fair many spectators gathered for an old-fashioned horse-pull. The champion horse pulled a sled with 4,500 pounds on it. The runner up was close, with a 4,400-pound pull. Some folks wondered what they could pull if they were hitched together. Separately, they pulled nearly 9,000 pounds, but when hitched and working as a team, the horses pulled more than 12,000 pounds, nearly three times what either one of them could pull, alone.2

Imagine the powerful force we could exert as a congregation, as a denomination, or as Christ’s Church in the world, if we all “pulled together as a team.” We cannot accomplish as much if we’re going in ten different directions; but with a shared purpose and a common vision, we can do almost anything. Especially when that purpose and vision is God given and God driven.

In a Family Circus comic, little Billy was praying. He prayed, “Make me good. And if you don’t get through to me the first time, please keep tryin’ ’til I answer.”3 That should be our prayer. As Jesus prayed for our unity we should continue to pray to be reminded. We should pray because we’re not called to do it alone. We’re called to pull together to serve God through Christ. “Make us one, Lord. And if you don’t get through the first time, please keep tryin’ ’til we answer and begin to pull together.”

Unity starts with us, and we must pull together to achieve it; **but** **the real secret is not giving up**. Unity isn’t easy. Most of us never learned how to disagree in love. Or how to love those with whom we disagree. We’re like the poet who wrote: “To dwell above with saints we love, that will be grace and glory. To live below with saints we know; well, that’s another story!”4

Jesus knew that unity does not come easily for us; but he prayed for it, and He modeled it for us. Remember when the disciples came to Jesus complaining about the people who preached and did miracles in Jesus’ name but who were not part of their group? They wanted to run them out of town or call down lightning upon their heads. Jesus told the disciples not to stop them and said, “whoever is not against us, is for us” (Mark 9:38-40).

Christian unity is not determined by whether we agree with each other about every interpretation of scripture or doctrine or form of church government. Christian unity is determined by whether we love one another, and whether we reflect the love of God in Christ for the world. There will always be things which separate Christian from Christian and church from church. But we can still affirm and celebrate God’s love for us all and our love for one another. In the ways of love, in the ways of mutual respect, understanding and acceptance, we can be “one” in Christ.

In the Apostle’s Creed, we affirm “I believe in the holy catholic church.” This affirmation causes some consternation for good Protestants because of the word “catholic.” But this word, catholic (with a small “c”), comes from two Greek words, *kata* (concerning) and *holos* (whole).5 Concerning the whole. Or, in a word, “universal.” By this affirmation, we are saying we believe we are one people, joined together in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul charges us to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” He reminds us that “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:3-6). It’s about unity, and it is a marvelous goal.

Canadian illustrator Ashleigh Brilliant draws cartoons with pithy sayings called “Pot Shots.” There is one I really like. Two people with walking sticks in hand, are climbing a mountain in knee-deep snow. The caption reads: “Keep Climbing Upwards! You may never reach the top, but it’s definitely in that direction.”6 Christian unity is not attained yet. We must continue to work toward unity and understanding between each other, between races, between cultures, and between denominations. We may not reach it in our lifetime, but by working toward it, at least we are headed in the right direction.

In one of Shakespeare’s most famous monologues, the St. Crispin’s Day speech from Henry V, the king inspires his soldiers in the face of grim odds with a rousing speech about how the men who fight this battle with him will be forever united as a “band of brothers.” This is a king speaking to peasants, and yet he is saying that what they are about to go through will unite them all as brothers.

As Christians, we are united with one another by an even stronger bond. It is easy to forget, but the church is made up of people who have the most important thing in common: the forgiveness of sins and our love for Jesus Christ. Because of the work God has done in all our lives, we can embrace the uncomfortableness and live in community with people with whom we may not naturally connect. We are called to demonstrate our unity in Christ through love. It must start with us. We must pull together. And we must keep on trying. Christ’s prayer and Christ’s command is still that we be one as He is one with God, and that we love one another as He loves us. We are part of the holy catholic church, the church universal, gathered in Christ’s name. Amen.

Sources:

1. Asimov Laughs Again, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), pp. 31-32

2. Parson’s Bible Illustrator for Windows

3. May 15, 1996, Bil Keane

4. Author unknown

5. <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/what-does-catholic-mean>

6. https://www.ashleighbrilliant.com/

**So We May All Be One**

Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2023 John 17:6-12, 20-26

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaac Asimov told a hilarious story about a Rabbi who argued with his congregation; they couldn’t agree on anything. The president of the congregation said, “Rabbi, this can’t continue. There must be a conference, and we must settle all areas of dispute once and for all.” The rabbi agreed.

The rabbi, the president, and ten elders met around a magnificent mahogany table in the conference room of the synagogue. As they dealt with each issue, it became more and more apparent that the rabbi was a lonely voice in the wilderness. The president said, “Come, Rabbi, enough of this. Let’s vote and allow the majority to rule.” He passed out slips of paper and each man made his mark. The votes were collected, and the president said, “You may examine them, Rabbi. It is eleven to one against you. We have the majority.”

Offended, the rabbi rose to his feet and said, “So, now you think because of the vote that you’re right and I’m wrong. Well, that’s not so. I stand here,” and he raised his arms impressively while looking heavenward, “and call upon the Holy One of Israel to give us a sign that I’m right and you’re wrong.”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than there was a deafening clap of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning that struck the table and cracked it in two. The room filled with smoke and fumes, and the president and the elders were hurled to the floor. Surrounded by rubble the rabbi stood erect and untouched, his eyes and smile flashing with triumph. Slowly, the president lifted himself out of the rubble. His hair was singed, his glasses were hanging from one ear, his clothing was in disarray. Finally, he said, “All right, eleven to two. But we still have the majority.”1

Unfortunately, we all know that not everything that is done in the Church or in the name of the Church is always done for the glory of God. We know that at times in history, the Church ignored the Will of God to have its own way. Consequently, there is discord and disunity in God’s Church. This disunity is apparent in the numbers of denominations that abound.