

My first year of seminary I remember sitting in my Methodism 101 class and being asked the question: “Who knows why we have a cross and two flames as our United Methodist logo?” Well, I had been a Methodist my whole life, but I did not know the answer to this question.

I finally learned in seminary that the cross which represented Christianity. The flames represented the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. The two flames which are connected represented the combining of the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist denominations in 1968 where we officially became United Methodists.

The logo reminds us who we are and where we have come from. I have always loved our logo and our name: “United Methodist.” What is beautiful about our denomination is that we are united with Methodists all over the world and together we are called to make disciples of Christ and to be in mission for God. We get to be a part of making a huge impact together in the world.

In order to continue to do the work of God together we must be unified in our faith in Jesus Christ.

In our practice of discipleship today it is hard to be unified in our faith with one another because it seems that there are far more things that divide us than bring us together. As we go out to do the work of God, we encounter many walls. Some of these boundaries are physical, we no longer live in a time where we know most of our neighbors.

Sometimes these barriers are spiritual. We are unable to connect with other people because of the brokenness that entraps them and us. We put up walls with one another in our daily lives when we refuse to be vulnerable with our family and friends and when we do not open our hearts to the stranger. We put up a wall between ourselves and God, when we refuse to put our full trust in God when life is not going our way. We think that these spiritual walls we put up will protect us, but in the end, they end up separating us from God and one another.

We see this behavior back in the Old Testament in Genesis 11 at the Tower of Babel. At that time, the people of God thought they could build a wall reaching heaven so they could be more powerful than God. Instead of drawing closer to God, we see this action took them further away from God and one another as they were scattered all over the earth, now speaking different languages.

This is what happens when we humans take things into our own hands, thinking that we are just as powerful as God, thinking that if only we work hard enough on our own, we will be able to tear down all the walls that separate us.

We cannot do this important work of God on our own. Instead of relying on ourselves, we must look to the relationship between God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In John 17, Jesus is praying a final powerful prayer over the disciples before his crucifixion. The most important part of the prayer happens in John 17:11 when Jesus says, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

This is the model of unity that was set up by God the Father and the Son. We see that these two persons of the Trinity have always been working together, in John 1 we hear that “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Our model of unity does not come from the world or even the disciples, it comes from the unity of the Trinity.ⁱ This is our foundation to take our faith forward.

As we approach Pentecost Sunday, we remember that on the day of Pentecost, God through the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, made it possible for all who were there to understand in one language what was being shared. One commentator put it this way: In the moment of Pentecost, “the tower of Babel was reversed. Sin destroyed communication; the Holy Spirit restored communication.”ⁱⁱ

In the action of Pentecost Sunday, we are reminded that we cannot break down the walls that separate us by ourselves, we need God’s help.

In this, the last Sunday of Easter, we prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit by modeling the oneness of the Trinity. In doing this we recognize that all three persons of the Trinity were always working together.

Even though the Trinity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were always together we experienced them in a linear fashion. We heard about God in the Old Testament, we learned about Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and then after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, we heard about the coming of the Holy Spirit. What we must understand is that God was always working in unity with Godself to reveal the nature of God.

The nature of the Trinity can be seen as far back as our Old Testament lesson from Exodus. In Exodus 6, commentary tells us that God tells Moses four important things that God will do:

- 1) “I will free you.”
- 2) “I will deliver you.”
- 3) “I will redeem you.
- 4) “I will take you” to be my people.ⁱⁱⁱ

This same God who made this promise to Moses and the Israelites in the Old Testament is the same God who frees us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on the cross, it is the same God who delivers us from sin, who redeems us with the precious blood of the lamb, and who takes us to be God’s people through the covenant of baptism which is sealed with water and the Holy Spirit.

God hasn’t changed, but we are changing all the time. In the midst of so much division in our world today and all the literal, figurative, and spiritual walls that separate us from one another, on this Sunday we are called to remember that we serve a God who can break down every wall and make us one.

This past week in our Disciple Bible Study class we were reminded of this when we read Ephesians 2:13-14 which states: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

Today, Christ is calling us to be unified in our faith through the cross so that we can continue to spread the good news of Christ.

On this Communion Sunday we hear the retelling of this story to us once again that Christ gave his life for us, that he was broken so that we could be free, so that we could be one. We take communion from one loaf reminding us that we are all one in the body of Christ. We take communion from one cup, reminding us that we are all one in the blood of Christ.

This is the same message that the Apostle Paul was so passionate about sharing. Even when he was imprisoned he wanted to make sure everyone heard these important words from Ephesians 4:1-6: Paul said,

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

We live into this calling of unity when we recognize that every life matters to God.

As I was looking for an illustration for this sermon, I had a strange encounter this week and an answer from God. We recently have been trying to eradicate our house of mice and have many traps set up around our house. On Thursday I happened to look at one of the sticky traps and saw a small lizard on it. Now this trap was meant for mice, so I was horrified and felt sorry for this little helpless animal.

I took the trap upstairs thinking it was too late for the lizard, but then I saw him trying to move to get free. So, I took him outside and tried to remove his tiny legs and body from the sticky trap, but nothing was working. I would get one part of his body free, then he would move and get another part stuck.

I wonder if this is how we look to God when we try to rid ourselves of sin on our own.

I was starting to panic and started to think that it was too late for this creature and that I may be doing more harm than good, but there was something inside of me that told me to keep trying. I sought help from YouTube and sure enough there was a solution. Moments later I took a little cooking oil and some Q-tips out to the trap and in 5 minutes the little lizard was free. He wasted no time jumping off the table and running to safety.

So often in our lives we give up on other people because it is too hard to help, because they have put up a wall between us, but we cannot give up on other people because they matter to God.

The good news for our lives today is that Jesus came in order to save each and every one of us and make us one through giving his life for us.

“The Cross that Unifies” Rev. Jessie Colwell June 2, 2019

We are one when we help each other, when we give thanks to God for the gift of Jesus Christ and the church. We are one when we see the needs in our community and respond with compassion. We are one when we pray for one another on our best days and our worst days.

May we continue to be one, as we worship God who breaks down every wall and sets us free. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Leander Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. IX. Abingdon Press. Nashville, Tn. 1995. P. 795.

ⁱⁱ Disciple 1 Bible Study Fast Track. Student Manual. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. P. 42.

ⁱⁱⁱ Keck et al. New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. 1. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 734.