

September 18, 2016

John 17:20-26

The Price of Division

Up to this point we have come to the conclusion that division is prevalent, undesirable and rooted in selfishness. Now it's time to drill down to consider the price of division. Dividedness costs us both in terms of what it keeps us from as well as what it causes.

Our text is from Jesus' farewell discourse when, after the Last Supper before his arrest, he shared parting words with his disciples. His words are to the disciples as well as future generations." He is praying to his Father saying, "I pray not only for them (the apostles), but also for those who believe in me because of their message (us). I pray that they may all be one." (John 17:20-21a)

Jesus paints a picture of a very specific form of unity. He wasn't talking about agreement in politics or theology or even the rules for church. He was describing the unifying power of love - God's love for us - which draws us together as one. The issue was not agreement as much as connection. It is possible to love another even when there is little agreement.

Jesus is warning us about effect when this sort of unity is shattered. Asbury uses the word, "hindered", meaning that what should be encouraged is impeded. For example, division takes time. It drains our energy and causes upset. It prevents us from being free to express ourselves as we are, instead we live within the constraints of our side of the "us vs them" divide.

Division, especially between the people of God, has two other serious costs. One, we proclaim to the world that winning an argument is more important than following what Jesus taught when he said, "May they be one so the world will believe that you (God the Father) sent me." (John 17:21) Our divisiveness tells the world that Christianity is no different than a political party with its agenda and infighting - and we should be different.

The second serious cost is that division within the church literally saddens the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4 Paul writes, "And do not make God's Holy Spirit sad; for the Spirit is God's mark of ownership on you, a guarantee that the Day will come when God will set you free. Get rid of all bitterness, passion, and anger. No more shouting or insults, no more hateful feelings of any sort. Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ.

I believe that the essence of God is creation and caring for God's creation. Division often is a force which breaks up and tears apart what God has created and bound together with love. The price paid for division is steep, both in terms of how we are diminished in our personal lives and how the in-breaking of God's kingdom is resisted.

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