

"The One and the Many"
Psalm 133; John 17:20-26
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Atlanta, GA
May 20, 2007

*'...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.'*
John 17:21

The death of Jerry Falwell last week caused many Americans to reflect on the nature of his legacy. For every uncritical adulation expressed, there was an equal set of passionate rejoinders pointing to the divisive, often harsh nature of his rhetoric over the course of his public ministry. This morning I want to express sympathy to Dr. Falwell's loved ones, to acknowledge the role he played in the religious and political landscape of the last 30 years, and to give thanks to God for those aspects of his life and his ministry that helped people.

Dr. Falwell and I had a very different understanding about Christian ministry. Even before I understood that I had a call to the ministry, I had the intuitive sense that human beings were better together than separated. Since I first went to seminary, I have tried to live out of the ideal of my vocation, which is a high calling but one that can be expressed very simply. A minister's role is to be a vessel, a connector, bringing people closer to God and to one another. I did not choose this arbitrarily. I have been literally, genuinely inspired by the idea expressed eloquently in the Letter to the Ephesians, that Christ came to tear down the dividing wall, that is the hostility, that exists between people. He came to proclaim peace to those who are far off and to those who are near. He is our peace. We are one in him.

I feel deeply about these matters today, because perhaps the most vivid memory I have of my early years of ministry is a memory that involves Dr.

Falwell. He led a rally on the steps of the Georgia State Capitol, which was across the street from the church I had just begun to serve. American flags were everywhere. The atmosphere was intense. Rev. Falwell spoke into the microphone, naming category after category of human beings who, in his mind, were displeasing to God. The crowd cheered. I was genuinely frightened. That was over twenty-five years ago, and ever since, voices that have divided and driven wedges have been strong in our country.

I have always tried to listen for the voice of God. I could die and get to heaven and find that I have been wrong about just about everything, but I have believed and still do, through Scripture and through experience, that our God is a God of grace and that people who are ordained to serve Christ need to help bring people together in the spirit of understanding. I call it what the Bible calls it: a ministry of reconciliation. In his Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." That's what God was doing in Christ, and God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, you and I, whatever we do, whether it is in the corporate sector or the religious sector, or the political arena, whatever we do, the foundation of it is God's call to bring people together, rather than to separate them. We are Christ's agents with a responsibility in the here and now to bear witness to what God has already done in Christ Jesus.

I have never succeeded in being a particularly faithful minister of reconciliation and none of the churches I have served has ever gotten it exactly right either, but we have tried, and I have tried. I think that wherever one falls on the religious or political or theological spectrum, there is always a grave danger of assuming that whoever is different from you or whoever disagrees with you is loved less by God than you are. I love a line written by the poet Rilke: *Beyond all our right doing and all our wrongdoing, there is field. I will meet you there.* I want to help people find a way to the field of God's dream. What is God's

dream? That the members of God's family live together in the unity God intended from the very beginning.

I think of an example of how challenging this can be. I once served a congregation in which there were a number of attorneys who worked for the district attorney's office. Some of them tried capital offense cases. They often asked the jury, the judge to deliver a death penalty. There were many members of this congregation, myself included, who were opposed to the death penalty. I actually used to help organize rallies every time there was an execution in Georgia, on the steps of the State Capitol. I believe that Christians have a right to speak in the public square. The people who were against the death penalty came to see me and said, "What's the matter with this church? We have all these district attorneys, and they are in favor of the death penalty! What are you going to do?"

I don't remember exactly what I said, but what I think I said is that regardless of what we feel about the death penalty, we are all one in Christ. What a terrible thing it would be for the Christian church if everybody who agreed with everybody about one set of things got together over here. And everybody who agreed about another set of things got together over there. And never the twain would meet. The Church is actually not our idea. We didn't think of it, and if we had we certainly would have designed it differently! The Church is God's idea, and it is grounded in the basic reality of the unity of God. We are drawn into the unity of God through the love of God revealed through Christ Jesus.

In the gospel of John, Jesus prays for his disciples what is called the High Priestly Prayer. It is a very moving scene. Where you are here, is the holy of holies of the Christian faith. This is as high as Christianity gets. The Son praying to the Father, interceding in a priestly way, before the first person of the Trinity, and not only for the disciples who were right there, but

astonishingly, for us! This prayer reaches out into the future, thousands – at least two thousand years. We were there. Jesus took us to the throne of God. *I am asking not only for these disciples, but on behalf of those who will belong to me, through them. Why? So that they all may be – not right – but ONE.* I actually prefer being right, but that's not what God has in mind.

God is one. The great contribution of the Hebrew tradition is monotheism, the oneness of God. Our Christian doctrine of the Trinity gives us a picture of God in God's own being as a richly varied community: There's the Holy Spirit doing the Holy Spirit thing, and there's God the Creator doing those things; then there's Christ the Savior. Different in function but one is essence – a community held together in perfect unity.

What is the church? It is the richly varied community, rooted in the oneness of God. We are to be the demonstration project of the nature of God, and the more excellent way revealed to us in Christ, the way that is more excellent than division and dissention.

One of the reasons, I believe, that some aspects of the Christian church are in decline in North America is that people are just not stupid. They understand that the church has been at war with itself. They understand that there are many Christians who think it's more important to verbally slug the person at the General Assembly, with whom they disagree, than it is to break bread at the communion table with them. People don't want to join a war-in-progress. People are motivated by hope. They are inspired by love. People can actually grow and change through the power of the Holy Spirit, but many people want to have nothing to do with a community of people who are circling around, fighting with one another, punch after punch.

When I was writing this sermon I thought of something I haven't thought of in a long time. Perhaps you haven't either. The Golden Rule. "Do unto others as

you as you would have them do unto you.” Would that not help our church, our families, our city, our world?

I don't want to be dismissed as unworthy. I have been careful in my words today to not dismiss with disrespect Jerry Falwell. It does not contribute to the good to be ugly. Your mama taught you that. She was right.

I saw a bumper sticker the other day you might like. “Jesus loves you, but I'm his favorite.” The fellow driving that car had forgotten to read the stories of Jesus in the Bible, like the one about the shepherd who, even though he had many sheep already in the fold, all 99 out of the 100 already there, sensed that one was missing, one, who actually didn't have any better sense than to get lost and into brambles and so forth. The one was as important to the shepherd as the many. That is the way it is with the heart of God. Unless every child is home, the family circle is not complete.

“Father, I desire that those whom you have given me may be with me where I am to see my glory, which you have given me because you have loved me before the foundation of the world.” I propose that the foundation of the world IS the love of the Father for the Son. That love is shared among us all. This is not a mushy kind of love. This is aggressive, life-giving, everlasting love. This is the force that rules the universe, and when you and I get ourselves in place to be channels, to be vessels of the good stuff, then the world will be changed.

Did you read last week or the week before about the astonishing developments in Northern Ireland? You remember Ian Paisley and the incredible, anti-Catholic rhetoric he engaged in for decades? You remember the bloody deaths and the mean spirited wars that have gone on between the Protestants and the Catholics in Northern Ireland? Guess what they have done! They have created a unity government. Martin McGuinness, Ian Paisley

sitting side by side, Paisley said, "I can honestly say that we have come to a time of peace when hatred will not longer rule."

These kinds of things actually are possible in our broken world, in which it appears as if dis-unity, dis-respect, hatred, have carried the day. That is the lie. The universe exists because God created it and created us to live together in some sort of peace. What does unity look like in the public sector? It looks at least like civility. Simple civility. In the church, it looks like love that just won't let the other person go, even though you might want to wring his or her neck. We see things differently, but we are held together by the super glue of God's eternal love. "We are NOT one, because we agree. We are one in Christ – period." (Michael Jenkins, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 11/7/05.)

I close with this. I remember some years ago reading a book by one of Atlanta's premier, pioneering psychiatrists, Dr. Tom Malone. He was a brilliant man, and this was a clinical book, about family and marriage relationships. Friends had recommended it; I bought it; I found it pretty tough going. Lots of medical language, a lot of clinical language, but then I hit upon one shining sentence. I didn't write it down, but it went something like this: In a relationship, it comes down often to whether you want to be right or whether you want to be connected. Whether you want to win or whether you are willing to lose the one you love. That's it, isn't it?

Jesus prayed to his Father, "The glory you have given to me I am giving to them, that they may be one, even as I am one with you." It is God, who in divine grace, has blessed us with the ministry of reconciliation. To God be the glory, in the Church and in the world, now and forever.