

John 17:20-25

Disciples DNA

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The passage we are looking at today is part of a prayer. Here, in the Gospel of John, shortly before his arrest, Jesus prays for his disciples. John's Gospel is very different from the narratives in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The author of John doesn't tell his readers about Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount (or Sermon on the Plain in Luke's gospel), including the part we call the Lord's Prayer. There are no examples of Jesus at a meal, saying anything that we might use as the words of institution for communion. Jesus never casts out demons in this book and the transfiguration is never mentioned.

Each one of the Gospels has its own themes running through it. Each author wants very much for his readers to believe and do certain things as a result of reading their work. The beginning of the Gospel of John gives us a big clue about the "big idea" of the Jesus story from this author's perspective. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." For the author of John, as long as there had been God, there had been Jesus, whom he names as the Word of God. It was important to the author that his readers understand Jesus and God as one. This idea of oneness between Jesus and God helps us understand the prayer before us this morning. We begin in the middle of the prayer:

²⁰ "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 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. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 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. ²⁴ Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

This idea of being ONE was the theme for the 2017 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This morning, I want to tell you a little bit about the General Assembly from which I recently returned. John and I had a wonderful time connecting with friends and colleagues and exploring Indianapolis. In front of the pulpit here, you see some of the treasures we brought back with us. Now is a good time for me to thank all who made it possible for me to be away last Sunday. I am grateful for our elders who led worship last week and am reminded that I would be lost without Dianne, my Administrative Assistant. Thank you all.

First, know that the purposes of the General Assembly are to gather in order to conduct the business of the church, learn from one another, and worship together. I have heard many describe it as a family reunion. As I have reflected on that metaphor for it, I have decided it is accurate. Our General Assembly, like family reunions, gathers people of all ages, from many places, with many different ideas and opinions, who express themselves in diverse ways, and who mostly want very much to be together. And, like most family reunions I have attended, there are moments that are absolutely wonderful and moments when each of us may quietly ask ourselves, "Do I really belong to this family?"

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we are called to answer yes to that question. As I talk this morning about my observations, I will try to point out some of our differences which, I believe, is important because even on a congregational level...in every church I have ever been part of, we have differences. The wonderful thing imbedded in the Disciples DNA is that we expect and respect these differences. The

way our church is structured makes room for diverse theologies, ideologies, and ways of being the church.

There are three expressions of the church in our structure. The General Church, Regional Church, and Local Church. We are connected to each other through a common covenant. There is no hierarchy. In the words of my youngest son at three years old, the General Church and Regional Church are, “not the boss of us.” The purposes of the General Church and Regional Church are to help us, as the Local Church, to do the big things, like mission, equipping clergy and lay people for ministry, partnering with ecumenical and interfaith bodies and being the church all over the world.

One example of a General Church ministry is Global Ministries which joins with partners all over the world to work for justice, reconciliation, and peace. This is a joint effort with the United Church of Christ. An example of a Regional ministry is each region’s committee on ministry which walks with clergy candidates through seminary, spending time with them along the way, making sure they meet expectations for ordination before the local church ordains the candidate. In theory, a local church could ordain a person for ministry whether the region signs off or not. That rarely happens and the person would not have ministerial standing in the region. The General Church administrates the Search and Call process for clergy. Each congregation is in control of who they call as their minister, but rest assured, if the candidate is in the Search and Call system, their credentials and education have been vetted.

I give you this brief overview of our structure because it helps us understand the way the business part of General Assembly functions. There are two kinds of resolutions brought to the assembly. The first type are called “operational, policy, and organizational resolutions. One such resolution at this assembly was the approval of the next assembly site, Des Moines, IA in 2019.

The other kind of resolutions are called sense of the assembly resolutions. These resolutions have been proposed by people in local churches, clergy and laity, and have been considered by the General Church Board before coming to the assembly. They concern moral, ethical, or religious matters confronting the church, nation, or world. Before the assembly votes on each resolution, one of the resolution's sponsors presents a summary and why they feel it is important for our church to act on or speak to it. And then others are invited to microphones to speak for or against it. Sometimes there are many different viewpoints spoken, other times there is little discussion and then the vote.

One particular discussion that comes to mind from this General Assembly was the discussion around resolution GA 1723, titled, On Becoming Immigrant Welcoming Congregations. The last person to speak spoke in favor of the resolution. It was Rev. Dr. William Barber. He said, "In this country, we don't have a problem welcoming immigrants, we have a problem welcoming brown skinned immigrants." He said, "It is a sin not to welcome immigrants. Let ICE come for our immigrant brothers and sisters. Let them come while we are holding their hands around the communion table. Let them come." He said, "If every church became a sanctuary church, we would shut down the sin of inhospitality toward the strangers in our midst." The crowd at the assembly erupted in applause and the resolution passed unanimously.

Some of the other sense of the assembly resolutions passed are:
GA 1719: A Call for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to Advocate for the Rights of Children Living Under Israeli Military Occupation

GA 1722: Repudiation of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery: A Call to Education and Action, and Support for Indigenous Voices in the Witness of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

When a vote is taken, and a resolution is passed, it means that of the people present at the assembly, most of them agreed the conviction or view expressed is based on their understanding of the ways of Jesus and the character of God. It does not mean all local congregations have to agree or abide by it. It is truly a “sense of the assembly”.

There were many more business items that I have not mentioned. I would be happy to direct you to the complete list and talk with you about any of them, including how I voted on each.

The very first business item presented at this assembly was the election of our new General Minister and President. Rev. Teresa Hord Owens was elected Sunday evening by an overwhelming majority. She was the Dean of Students at the Disciples Divinity House in Chicago and Sr. Minister of First Christian Church in Downers Grove, IL. She is bright, articulate, a lover of people, an inspiring preacher with a vision for the future, and she is the first African-American woman to lead a mainline protestant denomination in this country. How cool is that? We heard her preach Wednesday night on the last night of the assembly. She called on us to remember we have to do the work of the church together.

And of course, with the election of a new General Minister and President, we said good-bye to the one who has served our denomination faithfully for the last 12 years, Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins. Some of you may know her. And I can now say, I do too. I got to have coffee with her on the last day of the assembly, the morning of her last day as General Minister and President. It was a privilege. She was exactly who I thought she would be. She asked me to pass along her greetings to all of you.

Speaking of leadership, Rev. Dr. Barber, whom I mentioned before, has become a powerful voice in our denomination and for the most vulnerable in our nation. You know he is kind of a hero of mine which is why this particular picture is awesome. This was taken at the Disciples Rally 4 Family Justice, where Rev. Dr. Barber spoke about the relationship between racism and voter suppression. There were other speakers who spoke about environmental justice, immigration, rights for the LGBTQ community, and justice for indigenous people.

In addition to business and social justice rallies, hellos and good-byes, there were opportunities to learn at General Assembly. There were workshops on worship design, stewardship, justice, and leadership. I attended a number of them and hope to share the fruits of my learning with you in the months to come. I attended the core lecture on justice where the leader discussed how to invite people into the work of justice, the theological call to justice, and how, in some respects, the church has been coopted by the empire. I reflected on the parallels between the religious leaders in Jesus' day whose loyalty was empire over God and God's people and Christians today who have forgotten that Jesus stands on the side of the most vulnerable. The leader made a point of reminding us that verbose politicians, wealthy business men, and educated people with white skin (like me) are generally not the most vulnerable among us. It was encouraging to hear stories of other Disciples doing important justice work in their communities.

And we worshipped. Sunday morning, local congregations welcomed guest preachers from all over the United States and Canada. I, and the youth from our church, attended Central Christian Church in Indianapolis where we heard a sermon on Daniel 3 from Rev. Dr. William Barber. Daniel 3 is the story of King Nebuchadnezzar and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Barber's refrain in that sermon was "Stand your ground. Bowing down is not an option." Just as Shadrach and his friends were told to bow down to the false god of King

Nebuchadnezzar, we are tempted to bow down to wealth, security, and the ways of empire. Barber urged us to learn from Daniel 3 and refuse to bow down because God is in the fire with us, working for justice and peace for the “least of these.”

Each evening at General Assembly, we worshipped together in the Assembly Hall...more than 3000 of us. It was a beautiful place to be. It was also the place most of our differences showed up. I am certain planning worship for a large group of people, who do not all believe the same things about God, Jesus, worship liturgy, order of service, and the role of the preacher is quite a challenge. In fact, even before the assembly started, when participants received their assembly packets, there were concerns voiced about the music. Much of the music at our family reunion was representative of more conservative voices in our family. There were times it felt to me like nobody got the memo that I like the potato salad without mustard.

Other people were quite bothered by one or more of the preachers at General Assembly. In fact, I saw a Facebook post from an assembly participant that stated that he felt anyone who was not progressive and/or liberal was unwelcome at the assembly. He cited Rev. Dr. Serene Jones' sermon as the reason he felt this way. She talked about the disconnect between what is happening in Washington DC and what she identifies as foundational in her theology. I loved her sermon. I watched people walk out of it angry. It felt bad.

So all of this...the business, the learning, and the worship were brought together around the theme of ONE and the scripture which has Jesus praying that we all may be one. I came away from the assembly grateful for all I learned and experienced, really grateful for the colleagues I reconnected with. I came away renewed and refocused on what I believe God calls us to. We are called to be one voice, one people, who do not believe all the same things, but who believe that nothing is more

important than the oneness we find in God's love and care for all people that was revealed to us in the life of Jesus.

All of the things that divide us...worship music, politics, theology, leadership styles, culture, geography...all of it is not greater than the oneness we have in Jesus Christ. You see, when the author of John wrote his gospel, he was in the midst of a community that had some similarities with the world today. The people were divided. They were allowing the voices in the world to drown out the voice of God. And when Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell gathered this movement there was division too. There were people who thought disagreements over theology were reasons to walk away from community. Our founders said, "No." This oneness, this unity is in our DNA...all the way back to Jesus.

It is hard work to stay in community when we disagree...it's hard here in the local church and it's hard in the Regional and General Church expressions too. But it is so worth it. We have to keep at it. We have to care more about the state of the world and our neighbors than we care about proving our way of worshipping or our theology is "right". On the last night of the assembly, the very last song we sang is a song we sing here sometimes...it's one of my favorites, it's called One Spirit of Love. The chorus is: Many Gifts, one Spirit of love, one Spirit of love.

We are family. We don't think alike or act alike, but we love alike. We are the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)...a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.