

That All May Be One
Sermon by Leah Fowler
May 8, 2016 at The Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Texts: Acts 16:16-34 and John 17:20-26

In today's gospel text, Jesus leaves us with a hope: that all may be one. Let me repeat the text as John's gospel tells it: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." Jesus addresses God, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one."

This is a lot of coming together! Jesus is one with God, and we are one with Jesus, and one with each other. It can get confusing.

Especially in a church like ours, where we worship God as we come together from a variety of languages, cultural expectations, and ways of doing worship. I don't believe I have stepped into a cultural taboo yet but I don't expect it will be long before I do. When you genuinely share yourselves with one another, you are bound to step on some toes. I have learned that as being part of an interracial family. But the effort this church puts towards being a community that welcomes people of so many different backgrounds in the name of Jesus *is* one of the defining characteristics that made me feel called to this church in the first place.

When I was in college, I studied for a semester in Beijing, China. It was 20 years ago, so they were not quite so used to Americans as they are now. I stood out everywhere I went as the tall, pale *laowai*, which is what they called foreigners. Having grown up as white in America, I had never had the experience of being a racial minority. It gave me some perspective living as an outsider in someone else's country and not knowing the language. Learning to feel comfortable in my own skin as a racial minority later helped me when I came out as gay and again had to get used to being treated as an outsider. Still, in China people were always kind to me and treated me as a favored guest. I wish immigrants here would also be treated with the same level of kindness, but unfortunately that is not always true.

Jesus's hope that all may be one prepares us for the miracle coming on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends on the followers of Jesus and causes them to speak in every language known to visit the area. It is a sign that this gift of the Spirit is available to anyone, regardless of language or background.

This gift of the Spirit calls members of our congregation to sit almost every day of the week in this church talking with new English speakers in the ESL program our congregation offers. While the purpose stated is learning English, I have found in my first visits with these groups last week that *friendship* becomes at least as strong an outcome as new vocabulary. Others in our church have connected with CoFIA, where they advocate with and for day laborers who come from other countries. They help these guests know what they should expect of their rights and to stand up to abuses such as wage theft.

These are wonderful ministries! But I have to admit that the Christian church has not always practiced so well its witness to the oneness of Jesus' call. From the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which addressed differences of opinion about the nature of Jesus Christ, to the struggles to understand how the Church can welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons into the love of Jesus, the church has endured fracture in every age.

Even Paul, our lead missionary, misses the target in this week's first lectionary text. Paul once told the churches in Galatea, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." But today Paul misses the oneness he preaches when he overlooks the humanity of a young slave girl.

Here is what we know about this girl in Acts:

- She is possessed by a spirit of divination; the Greek text calls it a *pneuma pythonos*, which means "spirit of a python," referring to the python who guarded the oracle at Delphi and was slain by Apollo¹.
- The girl speaks the truth about Paul and his mates, saying "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."
- Paul finds this girl annoying. After days of listening to the girl's prophesies, he finally calls the spirit out of her in an act of exorcism. But it isn't clear that he does this for the girl's liberation so much as to stop the irritating behavior.
- The slave girl's owners become angry; the girl they exploited can no longer make them money, thanks to Paul. They bring Paul before the magistrates for disrupting Roman custom; the crowd joins in attacking, and Paul and Silas get thrown into jail.
- We never know what becomes of the slave girl.

¹ See annotation in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Acts 16:16

In ignoring the slave girl after Paul orders the spirit out of her, Paul misses a chance to model the oneness we find in Christ. Paul says and does things that show he is not perfect, and I can appreciate that; as your new minister, you will find that I will say or do things that reveal I am not perfect; you have probably already caught wind of this truth. I wonder what would have happened if Paul had stopped in his tracks to see that this girl would not only be free of the python spirit, but also of the slavery that kept her captive. What would her experience of Jesus be if she were truly free?

I do believe Paul sought to subvert the economic system that took advantage of this slave girl. In doing so, he attracts the anger of the authorities: "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe."

Christianity promotes customs that can be inconvenient for the status quo. Toes were certainly stepped upon throughout our history. When the Christian gospel came to Madagascar in the nineteenth century, England had decided that it must outlaw slavery. "England was seen as a Christian nation, so abolition was seen as a requirement of the Christian lifestyle. What a powerful message to people who had considered slavery as normal and as a way of getting wealthy! Jesus spared hundreds of thousands of Malagasy people from slavery."²

I imagine that as we live into the oneness to which Jesus calls us, we will hear many different stories, in many different accents, of how Jesus' salvation has become real to us, healing and changing lives and then calling us to heal and change the world. Sometimes, oneness will take work. We may step on another's toes. We may misinterpret what someone else says. We may see the big picture and miss the humanity of the person standing right next to us... or we may reach toward another to proclaim Jesus' salvation, yet miss the broader need for justice glaring at us.

When Jesus calls us to oneness, I do not believe he meant sameness, or conformity, or unilateral agreement. The oneness to which Jesus calls us recognizes that Jesus is one with God, and the love God has in Jesus is also in us, just as Jesus is in us. When we receive one another recognizing the presence of Christ in each unique face-- whether local or *laowai*, established follower or fresh recipient of the gospel, privileged or slave-- we glimpse God's glory in our midst. Look and discover! Amen.

² Daniel Rakotojoelinandrasana, "The Gospel in Adversity: Reading Acts 16:16-34 in African Context" in *Word and World*, v. XXI, number 2, Spring 2001 pp. 196-197