

Disciples: A People of the Parenthesis: *John 17:20-23*

Norwalk Christian Church, September 28, 2014, We Are Disciples Sermon Series Week 1, Proper 21, Year A

"We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us."

This is the identity statement of our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and over the next 5 weeks, starting now, we are going to break this statement a part, discovering what it means and what it means for us, as Disciples in this place.

But before we get into the specifics themes, I thought we first need to figure out who we are in the first place. If you are like most members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), you haven't a clue what that even means! For many of us, we're pretty sure what we are not, but we're not that confident about what we are.

[FOR 8:30] Now, if you want to study more about these themes, then you will want to go to our Sunday School immediately after this. We will have time for discussion, and to dig in deeper.

[FOR 9:30] Now, if you went to Sunday School class today, then you are already way ahead. So, those Sunday School skippers, come next week! We get a chance to explore deeper these themes together.

With that said, I want to take you back to the American Frontier. It was the first part of the 19th century, and America was experiencing a religious revival, known today as the Second Great Awakening. Throughout the country, people were finding their faith in the context of large, revival events. Families would travel weeks and months to attend these revivals. One of the largest of these events was held in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, organized by a Presbyterian Pastor named Barton Stone.

People of all Christian backgrounds attended the event in Cane Ridge, and, unlike most of the revivals, Stone was insistent that at this one all be treated equally. In churches of that day, in order to receive communion, you had to have a token, a little coin. That coin was your admission to the Lord's Table. If you didn't live right or believe right or look right, you didn't get a token, and for you, the table was closed. This practice sickened Stone, who believed that all should be welcomed. At Cane Ridge, there were no tokens. Everyone was invited to worship together and receive communion equally.

Soon after the revival ended, Stone and other pastors and leaders of the Presbyterian churches around Cane Ridge, known as the Springfield Presbytery, decided that for the cause of Christian Unity, they must leave their denomination and become simply Christians. They could not, after the experience of Cane Ridge, return to segregated Christianity, where the table was closed to some.

So, they gathered together and created what is now one of our founding documents, "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery." They wrote, "We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling." From then on, they would no

longer call themselves “Presbyterians”, but simply “Christians”, and their church was simply a Christian Church.

Within a few weeks of this event, Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander Campbell, both also Presbyterian ministers, arrived on the shores of America, leaving their home in Scotland. They settled in Washington, Pennsylvania, connecting with a group of religious reformers already active.

The Campbells soon became the leaders of this group, and together they founded the Brush Run Church, a small Baptist church. Having left religious sectarianism in Scotland, they were surprised to find the same in the States. They had hoped that this church would become a movement for unity among Christians across the United States. They were pretty audacious.

Soon, they shed the label of “baptist” and called themselves, simply, “Disciples of Christ”, after the term used of Christ’s followers in the Gospels. That’s all they wanted to be, simply followers of Christ.

Thomas Campbell drafted the founding document of their movement, called *The Declaration and Address*. Using the lofty language of his day, he wrote, “[We believe] that the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ.”

In layperson’s terms: “We believe that the Christ’s church, even though it is divided, is at it’s very core one church, inspite of all the differences. And we want to be a part of making that unity visible.

Both Stone and the Campbells saw the same problem in the church of their day. Competition was everywhere. Creeds divided. Pastors believed their role was to determine who was right, and who was wrong, and only those who were right could share fellowship at the Lord’s Table. So each, independently of the other, founded movements that moved beyond the division, hoping that they could usher in the unity of all Christians.

Talk about naive! Christians? United? You got to be kidding me! If there’s anything we Christian’s can do, it’s fight. I remember as a kid, witnessing a church fight, wherein two old men argued during a church meeting over who had more integrity.

We church folk know how to split hairs and fight about the smallest of things. It’s no wonder people want nothing to do with church. Can you imagine Stone and Campbell, standing up today, calling for Christian Unity?

Both lived during a time when they had seen a world torn up by religion, where people would even take up arms to fight those with whom they disagreed. Yet, inspite of these

differences, they both served the same Christ, who prayed in the garden on the night he was betrayed that his followers “would be one, as you and I are one.” For Stone and Campbell, Christian Unity, wasn’t a side distraction. It was the final wish of Jesus--the very mission of the church on earth.

Well, fast forward 30 or so years, and the movements started by Stone and the Campbells had spread all across the country. Soon, the two groups began to realize that, though separate, they were both working toward the same goal. Stone and Campbell certainly didn’t agree on much. In fact, on many things, they were polar opposites. They even had a series of debates over theological issues in the pages of their own respective journals. But they also understood, that if Christian unity was to be more than just a catchphrase, they had to put those differences aside.

So, on December 31st, 1831, Barton Stone traveled to Lexington, Kentucky, to meet with a man named Raccoon John Smith, who represented Alexander Campbell, who couldn’t come because of personal matters. Yes, that was his name, Raccoon. And he supposedly wore a Raccoon hat, too. Marti, can we name this next baby Raccoon?

Though they had many things they didn’t agree in, they laid those aside, shook hands, sharing the hand of fellowship, and united their two movements into one: the Disciples of Christ and the Christians.

As news spread of this union, some were over joyed! Some were angered, believing their differences were insurmountable. 60 years later, followers of Stone and Campbell would split, some choosing to go their own way, focusing more on getting every belief right instead of Christian Unity. But until their dying day, Stone and Campbell remained resolved that Christian Unity was the most important thing.

Had it not been for this handshake on New Years Eve, 1831, in Lexington, Kentucky, there never would’ve been a Norwalk Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

And that’s where we get the name! Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As far as denominational names go, it’s pretty clunky. It’s generic. Some have said it sounds kind of like a cult name. One person asked me recently, “Now are you a Christian Church.” I...I couldn’t believe the question. I mean, it’s in our name, right?!

It’s a bold name. Whenever we say our name, we are saying that we will be about Christ. That we are followers of no one but Christ. It’s a name that points us back, not to who founded us, but to who we should be as church. We are Christians! We are Disciples of Christ. And that is all that matters.

But what’s with the parenthesis?! I don’t know about you, but the parenthesis are what I love most about our name! Methodists don’t have parenthesis! The United Church of Christ likes to use the “comma” a lot. But we have parenthesis!

For me, the parenthesis reminds me of what's important. We are a church that knows what to put in parenthesis, and what to keep out. There are a lot of things we may do as a church, things we believe and practice, traditions we keep. Those may help define us, but they're for the parenthesis. They're not what's most important. That we serve Christ, that's what's most important. And if we, as a church, could learn what to keep in the parenthesis, then we are a church that's able to go wherever Christ may lead us.

I feel in love with Disciples in 2007. I was a pastor of a Church of Christ congregation in Irving, Texas. Church of Christ, ironically, is the denomination that split from the Disciples of Christ in the early 1900s. Not the friendly United Church of Christ you have around here, but the mean Church of Christ in the South. I had been reading up on the Disciples and became very intrigued. That year, the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the bi-annual gathering of our whole denomination, met in Fort Worth. And I had to go.

I will never forget the first night of General Assembly. The Rev. Sharon Watkins, our General Minister and President (another clunky name to be explained at another time), spoke on the state of our church. She told of all our church is doing across the country and world. She shared honestly about the struggles of being church in our world today, but spoke with hope about our church, a church that was made for a moment like this.

And I was in love. This was my church! This is what I was looking for! It took me 3 years almost to the day to officially become a Disciple. I had a lot of baggage to workout first. But I will never look back. This is my home. This is my church.

I believe that we are a church whose time has come. Our world is tired of the division. People don't want a church that tells them how to vote, or what to believe about social issues. People don't want a church that keeps you away from Christ's table because you don't confess the right creed, or because you are gay, or you are pro-choice, or pro-life, or whatever title someone may throw upon you.

Our world is not looking for another church whose message is that they are going to hell, and here are all the reasons why. A church that judges you because you don't have your beliefs or life all put together and figured out.

There is so much division in our world. There is so much hate. Our world is hungry for wholeness. Our world is hungry for welcome. Our world is hungry for a movement of people committed to being the welcoming, presence of Christ in the here and now, calling all people to join together at the Table of our Lord.

Our world is hungry for this. Norwalk is hungry for this. Norwalk is hungry for a movement just like us, for a church just like the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

May we be a movement for wholeness in our fragmented world, as we welcome all to the Lord's Table, as Christ has welcomed us.