

The Way to Oneness
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United Church of Strafford, Vermont
May 7, 2023 Fifth Sunday of Easter
Gospel of Thomas 24, 70, 77 & 113; John 14:1-17; John 17:20-23

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fifth Sunday of Easter. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

Today we have the joy of celebrating communion in the sanctuary for the first time since March of 2020. The word communion has Latin roots that translate as “union with,” or to join together with, but for our world today, everything depends on how we complete the phrase—with whom and with what do we see ourselves joined, and how widely does our oneness extend.

We need global oneness, but it cannot exist without local oneness. Every act of communion is a needed building block to a transformed world. So as we greet one another and talk together after today’s service, the empathy, care or support we extend to one another is an essential step toward establishing God’s realm of oneness and love on earth.

May we all be one today, as Jesus prayed, and may we find comfort and joy in that communion, and may we extend it as far beyond here as we can reach.

Call to Worship: There’s an old joke: What did the Buddhist monk say to the hot dog vendor? “Make me one with everything.”

It is not just Buddhists. Oneness is at the core of all major religions. Today’s Christian passages sound mystical, talking about the underlying oneness of all people and things, but now we know this mystical vision of oneness is scientific fact, that we are truly one in many different ways, from particle physics to genetics to a shared interdependence with one small planet.

The truth of oneness expressed mystically or scientifically is the foundation for oneness expressed ethically. People who understand their oneness with all other people will love their neighbor no matter how different they may be. People who understand their oneness with all the earth will live carefully and sustainably on it. People who understand their oneness with the Spirit that created the universe will treat all things as sacred.

Today we are celebrating this universal communion. Let us worship together the one source of all...

Children's Time— Today we are going to hear Jesus say one of his most repeated teachings, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.”

The problem is that some people think it means that only people who are Christian can reach God, and they hate, treat unfairly and even sometimes kill people because they are following another path to God.

C. S. Lewis got it right in the last part of the last Narnia book where the Christ-figure, the lion, Aslan, has welcomed all who wish to be there into his country, a place like heaven. The kings and queens of Narnia are surprised to find an enemy there, a soldier who fought against Aslan, but Aslan says that anyone who tries to live a good life and be loving and virtuous is actually following the way of Aslan, whether they know it or not.

It doesn't matter what religion they are part of, or even if they are our enemies, if they are following the way of love and kindness, they are one with us. When Jesus says “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to God except through me,” it means that we see in Jesus the true way of love and goodness, and that is the only way to be one with the Spirit of love and goodness that is in all people and all the earth.

But there are many, many paths that follow that way of love, and all those paths and all people walking in that general direction are united, in communion, on the same team, one in the Spirit, and if they travel that way far enough they come to see in the end that all people are one, whether they are on the way or not, whether they realize it or not, even as they act divided or wage wars, because all creatures and places on earth come from the same source and are one.

As we read in the Gospel of Thomas, the realm of God is here on earth—it's just that people don't see it. There is something we can do that helps us see our true oneness and helps us live it when our differences are getting in the way... Prayer shifts our focus from material differences that divide us to the Spirit that unites us, so let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

The Way to Oneness

Jesus did not live to see what came of his prayer “That they may all be one.”

The authentic letters of Paul are among the earliest writings we have from the followers of the Way, as the church was first called. The letters show that there already were differences and divisions less than thirty years after Jesus.

The reason there are many gospels is that different communities developed their own collections of sayings and stories. Mark was the first among the four in the Bible, Matthew was the most popular, and Luke came along and said in essence, forget all the different gospels you have read, here is the one true account.

John's community had a very different way of thinking and talking about Jesus. You don't have to read far to see that John is strongly offended by the Jews, who are blamed for everything, yet Jesus and all his disciples and most of his first followers were Jews, including John. Scholars believe that John's community had undergone a particularly painful divorce with the local synagogue, and perhaps had been harshly persecuted, and they took revenge in their gospel.

The other person who gets treated roughly in the Gospel of John is the disciple Thomas. Some scholars believe that John's and Thomas's communities had been united initially. The scholar Elaine Pagels believes the Gospel of John was written to refute the Gospel of Thomas because of their different understandings of Christ.

How would Jesus have felt about all this?

I suspect he would feel sad at the divisions and fighting over doctrinal differences, but he would perceive the underlying oneness of all those churches seeking to understand and follow the way he taught. He had the vision that C.S. Lewis shared of opposing paths still following the same way.

We can see how all those bickering churches two thousand years ago were truly one, but it is harder to see in our own time. We have not yet voted to be open to and affirming of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions, but there are churches that would condemn us for even considering it. It is hard to see possible oneness between a church of white supremacist Christian nationalists and a church that founded an anti-racism group in its town. I had a fundamentalist classmate in divinity school who did not consider anyone Christian unless they believed exactly what his church taught as inerrant truth. He told all his fellow Presbyterian and Methodist and United Church of Christ ministers-in-training that we were damned to hell.

How can we be one with that?

That is not a rhetorical question. It is a question that we must find a way to answer.

We have examples of people who have been able to bring together people across the most polarized, fearful and hateful divides. Maybe you have known some personally. We all know of Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The urgent question is how can we acquire that ability to foster oneness, because it is hard to imagine our democracy or planet surviving if we do not find a way to live and work together.

Ken Wilber talked about this problem in his book, *The Religion of Tomorrow*. He sees the most important role of organized religion as helping people over the course of their lives to progress to higher developmental stages of consciousness, from the fundamentalist to the rational to the pluralistic and finally to the integral or nondual or universalizing stage that Gandhi and Mandela attained.

Wilber acknowledges how stuck people can be if they do not naturally grow out of a fundamentalist world view, and how impossible it can seem for someone who is pluralistic to find oneness with a fundamentalist.

The hope Wilber holds out is that people who reach the stage beyond pluralism have the ability that Gandhi and Mandela did of seeing the oneness that transcends all differences, and then finding a path to bring everyone together.

So the question is, how can we move ourselves to that stage? Wilber is Buddhist, so it is not surprising that self-emptying mindfulness, meditation and inner work are central to his idea of how we progress spiritually. It is not surprising that the Hindu Gandhi said that silent prayer was his greatest weapon in the nonviolent struggle, and that self-emptying to zero makes a person attractive and powerful enough to accomplish miracles of oneness.

What some might find surprising is that followers of Jesus are called to the same self-emptying. Maybe *you* won't find that surprising because I have talked repeatedly about the four steps that the ancient church gave the Greek names of kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia. Kenosis means self-emptying. It leads to metanoia, meaning to go beyond our current level of consciousness to see more as the Spirit sees, a wider oneness. That expanded vision leads to a greater capacity for agape, a Christ-like, unconditional love for all. That kind of love naturally leads to koinonia, the creation of inclusive community, and ultimately, a world where we all are one.

This is a four-step path that we can travel many times a day in situations where we get our self out of the way and consequently have the vision of our heart expanded, leading to an increased capacity for love and resulting in building community, however small the scale. It is also a path that a person, community or even nation can travel over years leading to growth from one developmental stage to the next.

Jesus calls us to oneness and clearly sees it not only as possibility but as fact, as the true nature of reality. To paraphrase the Gospel of Thomas, oneness is spread out across the earth but we just don't see it unless we quiet our limited mode of thinking through kenosis and allow the Spirit to expand our vision through metanoia.

The first step on this way to oneness, and our greatest tool, is silent prayer, as Gandhi said, because it connects us to the Spirit that was in Jesus and all the builders of oneness we have known in our families and communities and world. So let us pray in silence seeking that Spirit in our heart...

Communion Invitation

Jesus prayed that we would all be one.

Paul envisioned the church as one body
united by the Spirit that flows through us all.

St. Francis expanded the oneness to include
all people, all creatures, all earth.

Today particle physics confirms what Jesus said,

“Split a piece of wood and I am there.

Lift a stone and I am there.”

Jesus explained how he is in God
and God is in him, and we are in them,
and they are in us, making us completely one.

“God is love, and those who abide in love
abide in God, and God abides in them.”

Come to this table to join in the realm of God's love,
this circle of oneness, taking in the body and blood

of both Christ and the earth, the grain and juice
that are about to become one with our body and blood.
Let us do this so that we may rise as one body
serving the cause of love,
so that all the world may be one.

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Little green leaves
on a slow gray day
give me sudden happiness.