

**BEING ONE OF MANY**  
**John 17:20-26**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, May 12, 2013**

Everyone wants to fit in, but everyone wants to be different. We seek solidarity with people from the same backgrounds and hold similar views, but no one likes being stereotyped.

To make things even more complicated, occasionally there's the rare bird who doesn't follow the crowd and refuses to be stereotyped, but even though you and I tend to go with the crowd, deep down you and I want to be rebels too.

The coupling of these divergent contradictions always causes an upheaval in the status quo. That's what happened in the '60's. The younger generation rejected the older generation's values and reinvented their own. Out with the old, the organization man in the grey flannel suit and in with the new, "doing your own thing" and never trusting anyone over thirty.

Curiously this movement to freedom and individuality had unintended consequences because everybody who marched to the beat of a different drummer suddenly found themselves as much in lockstep as their parents and without realizing it became what they detested the most: cogs in a new but deceptively similar machine of their own making.

Fast forward to today. The 60's are over yet its residual effects continue to linger. We still want to blend in but we still want to stand out, and that balancing act makes us vulnerable.

Madison Avenue expertly exploits our angst by cleverly marketing cars, clothes, even toothpaste with the guarantee if you drive this model car, or wear these stone washed jeans or use this toothpaste with a new whitening formula, you'll stand out from the crowd while blending into the American dream.

The problem is, if any of these products' advertising campaign is too successful, we'll still find ourselves bundled up together in the same vanilla package.

While with his closest friends in the Upper Room on the night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed aloud for his disciples, asking his Father that all of them would become "one."

"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. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us." (John 17:20-21)

The charge is made by the “new” atheists like Steven Hawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens that religion in general and Christianity in particular is a dangerous cult that robs us of our individuality. A cult is usually defined as a brain-washed group of people headed by a charismatic leader who absorbs their individuality into himself and reflects it back to them. Cult leaders demand absolute loyalty, so the followers are commanded to surrender their individuality to become one with the leader and each other.

This is not what Jesus prayed for. The scriptures report God created us in his image to be distinct individuals and gave us free will. We were not made to be inanimate cogs in a machine to be used up and discarded according to his whims. Instead as his beloved children we’re invited to live according to his will. Yes, God made us for himself but, and this is all important, God also gave himself for us.

That’s why becoming “one” isn’t a sentence to oblivion but an opportunity to embrace Christ and with his help explore our unique individuality in a way trendy fads and ad campaigns never could.

Then what did Jesus mean by this “oneness” he prayed for? When put in the context of the complete Gospel this single prayer for “oneness” is all about us entering into Christ’s passion and resurrection. What does that mean? It means letting your old self be crucified and die with Christ so you can be reborn and resurrected with Christ. What does that mean? Let’s stop with the theological jargon and speak plainly.

The process of becoming one with Christ and each other starts to happen as you begin to get to know who you really are, how much you are valued and what you can accomplish in community with others who are on the same voyage of discovery. Your real identity slowly overcomes your false imposed image of yourself. You realize despite your flaws and guilt, every time God thinks of you he falls in love with you all over again. You also discover you have the potential to contribute something important and lasting by helping to put back together again our broken world, all the while keeping both eyes open for God’s emerging Kingdom in and around you.

Next week is Pentecost Sunday, when the Holy Spirit’s presence flooded the Upper Room empowering the disciples to pick up where Jesus left off. No more would they be passive observers watching Jesus from the sidelines as he taught, healed and loved, now they would become active players in the arena putting themselves on the line for Christ and his Gospel.

We’ll talk more about that next week, but today let’s remember how the disciples spent the ten days between the time Jesus ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit came to them in power.

We read in Acts straight after they witnessed Christ’s Ascension they returned to Jerusalem.

“When they entered the city they went to the room upstairs where they were staying... All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer...” (Acts 1:13-14)

They were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Don't you wonder what they prayed for? If they were constantly in prayer did they all pray for the same thing, maybe, "Hurry up Holy Spirit do your stuff?" Maybe they prayed for courage and faith to take on the world. It's possible they prayed God would keep them from giving up and falling away and they probably prayed for each other because they knew they depended on each other.

Question: If you were there in the Upper Room, waiting for the Holy Spirit to descend on you, what would you pray for? Would you pray a prayer similar to Jesus' Gethsemane prayer? "Father, relieve me of any responsibility to give up my spare time and energy looking for people who need what I can give them. I really don't want to do this, but I guess if there's no one else, I'll do what you want, not my will, but thine be done."

Or maybe you'd pray, "Lord, I'm ready to take the next step and get out of my comfortable pew and go into the neighborhood. Trouble is Lord, I don't know what I'm supposed to do and I'm not sure if I have the right stuff to do it. Help me, Lord!"

Here's another possible prayer, "Lord, I need a sign, an affirmation that you are calling me to love and serve like Jesus. I need to know I'm not making this up in my head, that you picked me to do something for good."

Then again, I wonder if any of the prayers coming from the Upper Room sounded anything like this: "OK God, you got me in your grip, but I feel so unworthy. Help me see myself the way Jesus said he saw me. Help me love myself so I can love others better than I can now."

Like the disciples gathered together in the Upper Room, praying and waiting for the Holy Spirit, we are expected to wait for the Spirit to descend on us in this room. But are any of us devoting ourselves to prayer in preparation for the Spirit's coming?

The sermon began talking about our conflicting desires to fit yet be different and our inability on our own, to merge the two into one neat package. I then recalled Jesus' prayer to his Father that all his disciples, present and future, would experience the same oneness Jesus experienced with God. I then suggested this call to "oneness" doesn't threaten but enhances our individuality as God's beloved sons and daughters and Christ's beloved brothers and sisters who are now free to reclaim our humanity by coming to understand how much God values us and beginning to realize we've been given the potential to accomplish with each other if only you'd take the risk.

When God created us in his image he created each one to be one of a kind, unique and special, not so we can stand out from the crowd and parade our uniqueness for all to see. Instead we are made unique and special so we can blend together our unique personalities, natural talents and spiritual gifts for the greater good: to spread the Gospel by loving and serving people very much like us who without Christ are lost and confused.

On the great seal of the United States is our national motto, “Out of the many, One.” All the citizens of all the states combining together as one nation.

Maybe the motto of the Kingdom of God should read, “Out of the One, many.” Either way you get the point, before the Holy Spirit descends on us like the Apostles gathered in the Upper Room, we need to be in prayer so we are ready to be empowered to bring Christ into our neighborhood, Loch Raven Village and beyond, where God in his wisdom planted this church and called each one of us to be built up and then sent out to love and serve like Jesus.