

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, diverse but one, we give great thanks because we can be in your house on this day. We are grateful for good health, good spirits, and the love and warmth of community. Truly, these are great and wonderful gifts that we often take for granted. As we seek to grow in the knowledge of who we are and who you are guiding us to be, we seek your paths; the paths of goodness, kindness, peace, love, lifting up the other. Guide us to live as you instruct, for it is through lifting up our neighbor, same to us or otherwise, that we come to better understand the love and goodness that you have for all of us and your very nature as diversity within unity.

Thank you God, for the gift of mothers that care for us, love us, seek for us to be the best we can be. We thank you especially, God, for those here today that are mothers, those who have lovingly nurtured children just as you lovingly nurture us. Nevertheless, God, we live in a broken world. We recognize that many did not have loving mothers; we know many did not have mothers who were present because of broken family or death. We also acknowledge that there are many women who want to be mothers who cannot. We pray for those individuals today who find this a difficult holiday for these reasons and many more. Help us to appreciate all women who care for us as lovingly as mothers, although they may not hold that title. Thank you for the mother-like characteristics in our community that have fostered us to be here today, as we also seek to show those to all your creation. We pray all these things in the name of the loving Christ Jesus, who taught us to pray together, saying...

## SERMON

There is great wonder in our world, from the heights of the mountains, the beauty in our skies, the greenness in the grass. Indeed, creation was mightily and fearfully made. Consider, for example, ourselves, especially the gift of the human body. Some Christian traditions want to consider the body a sinful thing, but if that were the case, why would God have given us our bodies and then consider sinful the way they so seamlessly work? The body has so many pieces that work together in miraculous ways. So, when you look at another human body, how do you perceive it? Is the body a group of parts that work together under the direction of the brain? Is the body a galaxy of cells, each with a different function and connection to the rest? Or, on the other hand, do we consider the body one object in itself?

If we're talking about something like a human body or a house, we have the tendency to consider them one object. Let's ponder another example: we are worshipping in a church. We call it one building, one house of worship. At other times, we're more liable to separate the single into several. This is a church, but it is also made of many pews. There are floorboards, this is a pulpit made of many pieces of wood, and there are many chairs behind me. When you break it down, most of the things in our lives are single objects with multiple parts. We think of them as one, but they need the combination of many parts to work the way they should. They distinguish many parts, but we should not consider them separate. They work together for the benefit of the whole. In this prayer by Jesus, we catch a glimpse into the nature of Christ and the Creator together. We come to understand the great mystery of them being two persons, but not separate; they work in unity. Because they are one, that leads us to be one; we are individuals gathering as one

community in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is not the final word; we are ultimately the church in unity, not separate pieces of the church.

This is a beautiful speech by Jesus at the end of his time with the disciples. It is partly hopeful, partly instructive. Soon after this prayer, Judas Iscariot betrays Jesus into the hands of the Romans. The focus is on unity in the midst of diversity. Jesus confirms many times that he and the Creator are one. They abide in one another; Jesus is in the Creator and the Creator is in Jesus. Today, as confusing as it is, we believe God exists in three persons through our doctrine of the Trinity, but God is ultimately one. This is not a prayer that how it is with God will continue to be. No, the point is much more directive to us as Christ's believers.

This is a calling to all Christians. We are called to understand who God is, and, consequently, to understand who we are. We claim that Christ is fully God and fully human but, Christ was not two different people walking around. This is a mystery with which we struggle to understand. Christ exists in full unity. He understands the sorrows and joys we have as human beings while spreading the word with the full authority of our Creator. We believe that Christ, in one person, was fully incarnate human and fully incarnate God. This is the ultimate of diversity into one being. This is the two acting in one.

I remember in college, I had a conversation with a fellow Christian about issues in the greater church. We did not necessarily see eye-to-eye. He told me point-blank that since I did not fall in line with his understanding of Christianity and the issues, that I consequently was not a Christian. I found this to be hard to hear; I thought we were all brothers and sisters by virtue of our belief in the risen Christ. Even though Christ calls us into unity as God is in unity, we really struggle with this in today's church. I cannot help

but see the failures and the sorry state of the church universal in this wonderful prayer by Jesus. He calls the church to become fully one, and the greater church seems to be using its time to bicker over the smallest points of theology. We don't agree on this one little point, so we're going to consider this other group as an abomination to the Gospel. It's the calling card, unfortunately, of our brothers and sisters in the Westboro Baptist Church. That attitude of superiority and the sense of knowing what makes a "real" Christian and doesn't distort the Gospel, which is a gospel of love and inclusion under the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. I can't help but see in the stories of our Lord that Jesus didn't argue over pieces of doctrine but looked much more at the bigger picture. For him, it was all about the Spirit of the Law over the word of the law. To the Pharisees and to many Christians today, it's more about the word of the law and dividing the true from the false. When we call down our brothers and sisters who take on the name of Jesus Christ as "not Christian" in any form, we are saying that we are not one in Christ. If we say this, then we are implying at the same time that God is divided, when we always affirm that God is one.

It seems like an easy concept that we can be above and beyond: be united as Christians. On the other hand, life comes along, our rose-colored glasses go up in flames, and we see how hard this concept really is. Sooner or later, someone or a group of people really grinds your gears, and it's hard to live out the unity we're called to have. I am insulted by the Westboro Baptist Church and their politics of hatred in the name of God. In another example, it doesn't matter which side of the aisle you agree with in Congress, one side is always mocking the other. They say that this side is anti-American; this side does not know what it means to be Christian in both parties. If we truly believe that we don't have a right to tell other people if they truly are Christian, then how come so many

politicians who identify as Christians are so quick to mock other politicians who also claim the Lord Jesus Christ? Name any issue: gun control, immigration, homosexuality. If we don't agree, you don't believe what I do. Since I'm a Christian, that must mean you are not. That's never the point.

If we know what Christian unity does not look like, what does it look like? That is never an easy question, for we more often define it in negative ways than in positive ways. What we do is be in relationship with one another, good, bad, or otherwise. For instance, one positive way is to can sit with a fellow believer and discuss what differences we have and why we have them. Not a debate, a friendly discussion. We then seek to grow from that discussion. We often want to discuss matters with those we only agree with, so we feel affirmed in our opinions. On the other hand, it's no threat to faith to talk with someone who you disagree with and later walk away from that conversation agreeing to disagree. It can feel scary to do that, but it's a way that we affirm we are one despite our various differences. If Christ can tell us we should love those who hate us and pray for our enemies, it's not necessarily the worst thing to talk with a Christian you may disagree with!

Christian unity also takes different forms. I think one of the most profound images of unity is marriage, which, as you can guess, is foremost on my mind. Two people do not abandon their individuality but come together to become one unit, one team, one partnership. That in itself shows the differences we have and how we seek to reconcile those differences in a life-giving way for both people. It is heartbreaking when a marriage fails. The negative view of difference overpowers the rest, and it is tragic, for it is not like dissolving a contract but dissecting a living being. I think that in this imagery, we can see what Christ calls for in marriage: it's not about glorifying one's self, but glorifying the other

and what makes them special. Christ, through his sacrifice, is glorified, and he uses that glory to lead the church to be fully one. We must be individuals, but not over and above the other; we work in tandem at all times.

In God and in our community, there are multiple parts. There is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. There is Wayne, Bonnie, and Darlene. There is Jeff, Vicki, and Mary. There is Jodie, Connie, and Tawn. But to have multiple parts is not the same as separate. We are individuals, but not separate individuals. We are members of the Body of Christ. We are one in the Lord. Because Christ declares that he and God are one, that means we are able to be one in community. This is not a simple throwaway comment but a focus of our lives and ministry as Christians.

The Gospel is a hard thing to follow, and each of us is on a long journey to learn and discern what the Gospel means at each moment of our lives. It is far from an easy thing to grow to maturity in discipleship, but we each move at our own pace. Just because another person's journey does not look like ours, that does not mean that they are more or less Christian than we are; it simply means that we are not the same point of the journey. We do not rally together because we have signed the same statement of belief; we do not gather together because we are exactly alike. We are the church because we believe and live the same principle: Christ is Lord. We seek to live as Christ lived. After that, the rest is detail, just spice which makes our communities more inviting. We are individual members, but we are united, just as God is united. Let us not separate what God has brought together; let us not be separators of the unity which Christ seeks and instills. Let us instead be the ever-growing spiritual glue that names unity in the midst of diversity for the overall strengthening of Christ and Christ's ministry on earth. Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.