

I got interested in ecumenism when I was in seminary. Some of you may have heard of this weird churchy word – ecumenism. It’s a little hard to say. Hard to say but not, I think, hard to understand or appreciate. It refers to something that God made us for – unity. Unity, however, can be hard to live out.

Ecumenism is a claim, and it is a call. Ecumenism is a claim grounded in this prayer of Jesus that we hear in John’s Gospel today. It’s a claim that those who come to trust in Jesus are one as Jesus and God are one. Based on this claim, ecumenism is a call for us to work towards this oneness, hard as it can be - to make it real - as we go about our life and work as Christ’s body in the world – loving as God loved us.

As I say, I got particularly interested in the claim and the call of ecumenism when I was studying and discerning my call to be a pastor. I got interested in ecumenism - this movement for unity - I think, because of my background. I grew up in a small town on the west coast of Scotland. A part of the world steeped in animosity between Roman Catholics and protestants. Here were these two Christian religions that followed a God of love but who were embroiled in a bitter legacy of violence and vitriol. Violence and vitriol that emerged from the way religion was mixed up in the grasping and struggle for land and power; Violence and vitriol compounded by our human desire to be the one in the right and better than those others.

I also grew up in a context in which a lot of people did not have what they needed to flourish. Scotland of the 1970s and 80s was devastated by the decline of old industry and high unemployment. It was not difficult to see that people were suffering and lost and as a teenager I walked away from a church that seemed more interested in attendance and keeping the guard rails up around who could come lead and join their ranks than loving as Jesus loved.

From this context ecumenism called to me. A church that is one – unified – showing God’s love and mercy especially to those who are suffering – that made sense to me – still does. So, I gave myself to studying this movement. I worked with an ecumenical council in Renton that brought churches together to build community, learn from each other, and to serve and love others. In the process I learned a lot from incredible teachers who knew this gospel and knew the work of building unity.

They taught me that unity, oneness, does not mean sameness. God created a world, a universe, intended to work in harmony because of its diversity. That weird word Ecumenism comes from the Greek word 'Oikomene'. 'Oikomene' means the whole inhabited world or was understood to mean a flourishing household. It's also the root word for the English words ecology and economics. All of these are concepts that speak of systems which when working well are comprised of diverse parts. Each part with something to offer – something the whole needs. When these systems are working well, all parts are contributing, living into who they were created to be, and there is balance and flourishing.

It is not that there is no pain and loss in the cycles of life that make up such systems – of course there is, but these are held and honored. There isn't cruelty or exclusion. But when diversity is squashed and one part of the system starts to take up too much space, it starts to drown out or reject others, and what they bring, then things get out of whack and the larger community is compromised and starts to fail.

You can here in this description of unity or flourishing ecology that there is an invitation to bring one's unique gifts and there are also limits to how much we show up. It is not the case that unity and oneness means that anything goes. But where should we draw our boundaries.

Now it is in this respect that we, the church, must be very careful. The church has a history of telling people that you cannot be a part of us, cannot have part of God, unless you have right belief – unless you ascribe to a set way of thinking about God and what God wants from us. It is easy to get here. Doesn't Jesus say many times that he wants people to believe in him. Belief comes up in our texts today.

But the word that is translated as belief is less about intellectual affirmation, less about signing onto one definitive set of doctrines, less about how getting it exactly right in terms of how to understand the mystery of God and it is more about trust. More about trusting in the person of God as known through Jesus.

There were plenty of people in Jesus' community who wrestled and questioned, who wavered in their understanding, and who disbelieved, and who lived out their love of God in different ways, but they were still loved, they were still held in community, still needed if we are to flourish and be whole. Jesus when he asks his disciples do you believe in me is saying do you trust me. Do you trust the person

that I am showing God to be – a person of compassion and love, a person who loves you, a person on the side of the outsider and the hurting, a person who cares for those who are held at arm's length by polite society, a person who came to suffer and sacrifice so that you can see the depths of God's love for you? Do you trust that? Do you trust me and my power to act in the world to liberate and heal?

Unity requires that we have boundaries. It is not the case where anything goes. But the thing that doesn't go is legislating our own absolute interpretation of this word and these symbols of baptism and table. It's not about closing our ears to how others understand them and what they mean in their lives. What doesn't go is showing up in ways that do not trust God's invitation to compassion and kindness and inclusion. What doesn't go is the demand for right belief and shaming or exclusion of the basis of that belief over trust in the power of love and compassion and empathy.

And this takes me to my last learning about unity. Working in harmony, making room for the gifts of others so that something beautiful and nurturing can grow be born requires vulnerability, deep presence, and deep listening.

I heard this wonderful piece on the radio this week about a flautist called Nina Moske. Nina is a recent graduate of Duke University and while there she was part of an improvisational ensemble. As the group got ready to improvise, they would put their music stands to the side and wait for someone to start so that they could try to make music together. There was no prior conversation about key, meter, or theme.

As Nina engaged in the frightening and overwhelming task of trying to make music with others with no score or conductor, she said the best guidance she received was to resist the temptation to try to fill the space or perform for others. Instead, her mentor told her that when she felt like she didn't know what to do she should put down her instrument and listen. Listen for what was happening – really listen and when she recognized a place where she could add a little something to fill out or move the music along, then and only then should she lift up her flute and join in – experiment, listen to herself and how she fits, make mistakes and try again. Nina says this was difficult because we are programmed to produce and perform perfectly, to reject such vulnerability and patience and trust. But when choosing vulnerability and patience and trust instead, when she listened first and then added

her gifts with the whole in mind, she felt liberated and deeply present – part of something bigger than herself – something beautiful and real.

Beloved, we are called to oneness, to unity, to building harmony as communities, as churches, as families, as friends. For this unity to have a shot we need diversity, we need those who are different to learn and grow with; we need to center in the way of Jesus – putting love, mercy, compassion and trust, not right belief first; and we need to listen deeply, that we might bring our own God-given gifts alongside the gifts of others to make more real the beloved community that God has created us to be. These are the things that we are to be about here in this place and in our lives in the world. May God bless the work of God's church and your work as God's beloved and may God bring us to unity - unity with God, with each other, and with the world God so loves. Amen