

“E PLURIBUS UNUM”

a sermon by

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First Presbyterian Church
Galveston, Texas

August 6, 2006

Text: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

This month marks the 200th anniversary of a unique and essential event in the history of all Christendom. It was in August 1806 that a group of young students at Williams College were brought together for a most peculiar meeting. In the afternoon, a summer storm had come suddenly upon them. A clap of thunder, a bolt of lightening and quickly they met together under a haystack seeking shelter from the weather.

Once there, these young men held a prayer meeting. This makes sense, in part because of the circumstances that brought them together. A lightening strike just a few feet away will bring most people to prayer. But, more than that, these men had been accustomed to meeting twice-weekly for prayer. But on this day, the prayer of the people and the response of the divine were quite different. As one historian described the sequence of events, their customary prayer “was focused inward or on their recurring concern for a spiritual revival on campus. But crammed together under the haystack on that August afternoon in 1806, their prayers turned outward – especially to the needs of Asia and the lack of a vital missionary presence in that region of the world. As conversation turned to conviction, the young men began praying for a missionary movement that would carry the gospel from their Massachusetts campus and all of New England to distant lands.”

Within the relative safety and security of a haystack, those men could see outside – beyond the field, over the horizon to people who themselves were in need of the Gospel. Six years later, the first American missionaries would be commissioned and sent out across the globe. This first group included a few who had participated in the haystack meeting, along with others. As good Presbyterians, we have no idea as to who they were. These first missionaries were Samuel Nott, Samuel Newell, Gordon Hall, Luther Nott, Adoniram Judson, and his new bride, Ann Judson.

Over the following years, these five men and one woman will suffer every hardship, calamity and illness imaginable. They depart leaving voluntarily the comforts of home and hearth, the security of family and friends. They travel to carry the gospel message to an unknowing people. Their treatment by these other peoples is nothing less than horrible. Within 30 years, only two – Adoniram Judson and Samuel Nott – will survive. By then, all of the others will have died in the mission field.

From such an unlikely beginning – a few men huddled under a haystack, seeking shelter from a storm – American Christians continue the tradition of going across the world to do the work that God has called us to do.

As we gather this morning to celebrate the Sacrament of Communion, it is appropriate that we remember the birth of the American Missionary movement. Through the years that have followed, American Christian congregations have commissioned and sent out a seemingly endless stream of women and men – equipped and charged for every kind of work and service. Through our collective efforts roads have been built, schools opened, water wells dug, medical services provided and more than a few head of livestock received. Through this collective work, countless people have come to faith in God through Jesus Christ.

The miracle of foreign missions and the hope that we have in the Gospel are rooted not in our best intentions and good work. The miracle and the hope are rooted in the work of God. Something of this is found in the letter to the Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

This letter was written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians in the city of Ephesus. The unusual, modern nature of first-century Ephesus add to the fact that this letter, its content and context continues to be important to Christians even today. The city of Ephesus was modern, sophisticated and diverse. A minister-friend is fond of comparing the cities of Rome and Ephesus to today’s Washington, DC and New York City. Rome, like Washington, was the seat of all power. Ephesus, like New York, was a sprawling city with modern amenities, with the arts, and with a complex diversity of peoples all living within close proximity to one another. Different languages, traditions, family-systems, customs, and, yes, different religions were forged together within the city.

Into the context of this tremendous diversity, the Apostle Paul spoke of that which unifies the Christian people. Regardless of all that could divide the diverse community of Christians, Paul writes to them as “the Body of Christ.” In Ephesus the church members included a broad cross-section of the diverse city. God’s grace separated out each of these individuals, calling them away from their former identities, and brought them together to be one.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God....”

From many, they had become one. And yet, in spite of all that had united them –one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all – the Christians of Ephesus seem to have been blinded to that which held them together. That blindness was neither unique to them, nor is it unknown by us.

A Modern Dilemma

Our society, our economy, our very way of life is built around the authority and the autonomy of each individual. This is an important influence in the way that Americans approach our relationship with our church.

Consider, for example, the way that Americans go about the work of finding a church. There was a day that people moved to a community and worshipped at the nearest church of their faith. A Presbyterian attended the nearest Presbyterian Church. A Methodist attended the nearest Methodist Church. A Baptist attended the nearest Baptist Church. In that model of finding a church home, there was an assumption of the importance of the community. That day-gone-by reflected a communal value and appreciation for the surrounding community. Your neighbors were also the people with whom you would work and worship.

Today, when people move to a new community there is no longer the assumption, the expectation – or for that matter, rarely is there even the hope – that they will seek out a place of worship. No longer do neighbors invite a new resident to the neighborhood church.

Instead, there is now a new tradition for finding a church home. If one is inclined to find a place to worship, they tend to follow what I would describe as a bizarre procedure. We call it “Church shopping.” As if one is seeking nothing more than any ordinary commodity to be consumed, people take their mental and emotional score card from one church to another. All the while they grade each congregation on its friendliness, music, preaching, Church school, children’s programs and whatever else can be imagined. All of these tangible and intangible elements are scored before a decision can be made.

An Illinois pastor recently published an article where he told of a conversation with a couple who had decided that they and their teenage children were to leave their congregation for another church in their area.

“During my conversation with Greg and Margaret at Starbucks, I asked how they came to choose Faith Community as their new church. ‘Did you pray as a family about this decision?’ No.

‘Did you involve your small group or seek the wisdom of an elder in your decision?’ No.

‘Did you investigate the church’s doctrine, history or philosophy of ministry?’ No.

‘Did you base your decision on anything other than what you “liked”?’ No.

Of this conversation, the pastor goes on to conclude, “Greg and Margaret intuitively accepted that the personal enrichment and fulfillment of desire is the highest good. As a result, they chose the church that best satisfied their family’s preferences without bothering to consult their community, the Bible, or the Holy Spirit to gauge the legitimacy of those desires. After all, in consumerism a desire is never illegitimate, it is only unmet.”

Church shopping. We can choose to like it, or not. We can choose to agree with it, or not. We can even choose whether to do it, or not. But we will not change it. For what it’s worth, I absolutely don’t blame people for church shopping. For too long, too many churches have stopped being the Body of Christ. Too many congregations have reduced themselves to one-sided political action committees, to second-rate social service agencies, or to nothing more than a simple consumer choice.

Personally, I see this as the failure of Christian ministers. By our actions, by the choices that we make with our time, pastors produce programs and activities intended to reach through the congregation and into the community around us. We hope and pray that our efforts are rewarded by a growing church membership, worship attendance, and, we pray, for the ability to pay for our children’s college educations. Too often, even pastors forget about the unity of the life of the church, the power that we have in God.

Our ecclesiastical economy plays into the mindset that, as the Illinois pastor said, “...the personal enrichment and fulfillment of desire is the highest good.”

E Pluribus Unum

The church is more than the sum of its earthly parts. The Body of Christ includes more than the collective membership of all Christian congregations, more than the bricks and mortar in which we gather. We are a diverse and too often a divided people. But, from many, God makes one.

The motto of these United States is a Latin phrase, “*E Pluribus Unum*” (“From Many, One,”). This phrase is printed on the Great Seal of our nation and appears on many coins. “Although selected in 1776 by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson for the Continental Congress, it was not officially adopted as a national motto until six years later.”

The phrase, E Pluribus Unum, has ancient roots. It appears in a poem written by Virgil, a Greek poet who lived within the century before the birth of Jesus.

*It manus in gyrum; paullatim singula vires
Deperdunt proprias; color est E pluribus unus.*

Spins round the stirring hand; lose by degrees
Their separate powers the parts, and comes at last
From many several colors one that rules.

Even in the midst of many, we can be made one. Like the ancient Ephesians before us, we would do well to remember that the unity we enjoy, the unified body that we are, is not an earthly, worldly unity. This is not of our own doing. It is a gift from God.

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

Yes, our Christian unity is something that happens, really in spite of our best intentions and our most fervent actions. But the unity that we have with God should be reflected in our prayers and in our actions.

Two Hundred years ago this month, a thunderstorm drove a disparate and self-centered group of men under a haystack. Once there they found the ability to see beyond their present time and place. With their ability to look beyond the horizon, the American Christian missionary movement began. Even today this work continues.

One of those early missionaries, Adoniram Judson, served overseas for 37 years. Only once did he return to the United States. Through letters written by his wife, Ann Judson, he had become a celebrity. This gave him an opportunity to speak with people who themselves might never travel abroad in the service of our God.

For them – and, for us – Judson offered this advice, “The motto for every missionary, whether preacher, printer, or schoolmaster, ought to be ‘Devoted for Life.’”

Yes, we ought to be devoted for life.

Amen.