

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: March 24, 2016
Sermon Title: Maundy Thursday
Scripture: John 17 (selection)
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

From John 17

Jesus looked toward Heaven and said, "Now, Father, Glorify your son. I have completed the work you gave me to do."

I pray for the disciples you gave me.

Protect them, so that they may be one, even as we are one.

I pray for all those who will believe in me, that all of them may be one, just as you are in me, and I am in you.

May they be brought to complete Unity to let the world know that you sent me.

Prayer: Lord, we want to believe in a miracle. We want to believe there can be unity in diversity, that right and left need not be right or wrong, left or left out, "my way of the highway." With you, we want to believe that we might all be one, one in spirit that infuses each word, thought, and deed. We honor opinion and taste. We recognize paths and strategies in the plural. We're glad there is chocolate and vanilla. We are not robots, mentally or spiritually. Teach us, Lord, the difference between difference and divisions, between preference and arrogance, between holiness and holier-than-thou haughtiness, between my and your way.

Lord, may we be the answer to your prayer to be one. Amen.

Let me start with a history lesson. Jesus came to earth to show the way to God. That's lofty language, but basically, that's it. Humanity and God were pretty far apart, Jesus comes to bring them together, bring us together. He does his job, some miracles, some teaching, got some believers, started a movement. Then he's done. It's over. He's done his part.

That brings us to tonight. Maundy Thursday, his "Last Supper." Jesus gathers his closest friends for one last meal. I'm sure many of us have had farewells; things come to an end. As the song says, "Time to say goodbye." And usually, when we end something, we want to leave an impression, leave a mark, we don't want to slink away or sneak out the back door.

So Jesus plans his ending rather dramatically. And that's what we do in Holy week. A big parade on Palm Sunday. A Last Supper on Maundy Thursday. A memorable death on Friday. A glorious resurrection on Easter Sunday. That is some exit!

Last week I went to an excellent Broadway play and a powerful movie. Both had blunt endings. In the play, a man shuffled out the basement door, and the lights went out. In the movie, the screen went black. Each ended with a thud, with more questions than answers, with emptiness.

Jesus ends with victory, but there's plenty of drama on the way. Maundy Thursday is part of the drama and turmoil. His Last Supper is heavy with emotion. With all of his friends there, he gives them bread and wine and says, "This is my body, broken for you . . . this is my blood, shed for you."

That got their attention. He predicted their betrayal. That made them defensive. He got down on his hands and knees and washed his friends' feet. That made them squirm. Then he prayed a long, long prayer, on and on, 26 verses, impassioned, repetitive. And the theme? Unity. Togetherness. Oneness. It was a prayer to God about them, his friends. And his point seemed to be, "Hey, God, you and I are one; help them to be one. You and I get along; help them to get along." And the "them" is us. Jesus wants us, his Church, his followers, to get along, to be united, to be one.

Jesus failed. We don't like to think that. But if you apply yourself to something, you make it a goal, and if it doesn't happen, you failed. On the last night of Jesus's earthly human life, the night we call "Maundy Thursday," Jesus prayed that Christianity would be unified. He called for oneness, unity, an unbreakable bond. It didn't happen. He failed. Or we failed. But it didn't happen, and it was a big deal.

O.K., it's too harsh to say "Jesus failed," so let's put the blame where it belongs. We failed. We Christians have been at one another's throats for 2,000 years, dividing, subdividing, conquering, competing. When I say "one another's throats," I mean that literally. We have imprisoned one another, outlawed one another, persecuted one another, burned one another at the stake.

In more modern times, we only mock one another or ignore one another. You would never know we're on the same team or have the same "Father" or share the same Jesus.

Now, I'm not complaining about differences in taste or style. There's nothing wrong with having fancy Churches and plain Churches, big Churches and small Churches, formal Churches and informal Churches, modern Churches and traditional Churches, quiet Churches and noisy Churches. Those differences don't turn one person against another, neighbor against neighbor; those differences don't make a mockery of Jesus's "great prayer" for unity. It's when we sneer at one another, fight one another, that makes Maundy Thursday a failure.

Some of you will remember a religion called the "Unification Church." People used to call them "Moonies" because their founder was Rev. Moon. In the '70s and '80s these Moonies would visit churches and pastors, offering enticement. They'd come to me; sometimes they brought chocolates and roses. Sometimes they offered me free trips to the Caribbean. One time, two Moonies came to my office; one of them was Irish. He had been a Catholic priest in Ireland. I was shocked. So I said to him, "How does a priest from Ireland become a Moonie?" He said, "If you were a Christian in Ireland, you'd become a Moonie too." I didn't have an answer to that. Ireland had decades, centuries of Christians killing Christians, oppressing, persecuting, defaming, hating, killing one another.

Believe me, I could tell you hundreds of stories today, not just historical stories, but stories from my own life, where one kind of Christian devalued another. Priests who wouldn't come to weddings when one kind of Christian married another kind of Christian. Friends who couldn't be Godparents because they went to the wrong church. People denied membership because they were baptized the "wrong" way. Christians refused communion because they were the wrong Christians. Pastors who were not allowed to meet with other pastors from the wrong denominations. Christians who couldn't join a Church because they were the wrong color or married to the wrong person or read the wrong Bible or had the wrong parents. All in the name of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for us, and the last thing on his mind that last night was that we get along, we work together, we act as one. "Jesus!" I feel like saying that—not as a curse word but a prayer—as an emphasis, "Jesus," or "for Christ's sake," can we act as *one*?

There are signs of unity here and there. Our denomination, The United Church of Christ, we are the result of three denominations coming together in the 1950s. Nowadays, most mergers are the result of desperation: one dying Church joining with another dying Church. But back then, we believed

we were on the cutting edge, the future of Christianity, people uniting. Listen to our name again: *The United Church of Christ*.

My first important Church event, I would have been about 10 years old, but I remember so clearly our little Church in Queens all gathered together to vote. Should we stay separate, divided, or unite? Become one with other Christians? The joy in our little Church when we took a step toward others, it was like Easter, a miracle of love!

A few years later, when Pope John XXIII ushered in a new era of ecumenism, of acting as if we were one, all of a sudden, Protestants and Catholics in our neighborhood stopped acting like mortal enemies, stopped telling one another they were going to Hell. I remember one night I came home after Boy Scouts and was amazed to find my house full of Catholics. All those Catholic neighbors sitting in a circle with my mother and father and a few folks from our Church. It was part of a movement called "Living Room Dialogues."

By the time I got to seminary in the late '60s, all the talk was about "COCU," Council on Church Union. COCU actually believed various Protestant groups were going to move toward one another after 400 years of dividing and competing and alienating. But it's been slow to happen. Unity, "honest-to-goodness, we-like-one-another, we-respect-one-another" unity is rare.

In a moment we will move to the Lord's Table. We will experience the highlight of Maundy Thursday. What we call our "one long Communion table." As we do so, we'll ask you to think about some questions about *unity*. If it was so important to Jesus, how can we make it so important to Greenfield Hill Church? When we first started this one long Communion table, eight or nine years ago, it was meant as a symbol of oneness. All of us together at one table, an image to carry with us out into the world.

Next week, the Town of Fairfield has asked me to take part in a celebration honoring the "Four Chaplains." You might know the story. On February 3, 1943, a German submarine blew up the U.S. Army Transport Dorchester, carrying 902 soldiers. As the ship sank, the soldiers were rushed to lifeboats and reached for lifejackets. During those last minutes of terror, four Army chaplains did all in their power to guide soldiers to safety, comfort the wounded, distribute the lifejackets. When they ran out of lifejackets, each of the chaplains, a rabbi, a priest, and two Protestant pastors, each chaplain took off his own lifejacket and gave it to a soldier. As the ship sank, soldiers on lifeboats reported they could see the chaplains, arms linked, offering prayers and singing hymns.

Here's what I found on a United States Army Web site. I can't say it any better, so I'll just quote the army:

"When giving their life jackets, Rabbi Goode did not call out for a Jew; Father Washington did not call out for a Catholic; nor did Fox or Poling call out for a Protestant. They simply gave their life jackets to the next man in line. One survivor would later call it, 'It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of Heaven.'"

(http://www.army.mil/article/34090/Chaplain_Corps_History_The_Four_Chaplains/)

I liked that last phrase, "this side of Heaven." *This side of Heaven*. Right here. Right now. Christians are very fond of talking about Heaven, where all our differences and conflicts fade away, as if all of a sudden, after we're dead, we'll be nice to one another. But Jesus's Maundy Thursday prayer is for this side of Heaven, for us to live as one right now.

The Four chaplains chose to live out their lives as one. So can we. We can start right here in Church with our attitude toward one another and others as one. The world around us is in disarray. Disunity tears at the fabric of all we hold dear. We need to be the difference. Let *us* face that world as one.