

**May 8, 2005**  
**Acts 16:6-15, John 17:6-11, 20-26**  
**Dr. Lewis Galloway**

**“The Marks of Unity”**

Some years ago when my family and I were in Scotland, we visited a small town called Pitlochry. The river at Pitlochry, which salmon use to reach spawning grounds, was dammed to produce hydroelectric power. The engineers constructed a salmon ladder next to the dam. The ladder is a series of stepped pools connected to each other by large underwater pipes. This system of pools and pipes enables the salmon to swim upstream around the dam. Next to these pools are observation areas where visitors can look through glass windows to see the salmon swimming upstream.

Through the windows, we watched the salmon swimming against the current to reach their spawning grounds. We could see the beauty of each salmon’s form and force as it made its way against the flow of the water. With undulating body and flick of fin, the salmon held firm against the heaving river, and then, suddenly, as if by command, they surged forward into the next pool. Each moved as an individual fish. Yet, they seemed to move together as lines of music advance through a symphony with each stroke of the conductor’s baton. United by some unseen force of nature or directed by nature’s baton, the salmon swam upwards to their destination.

When I see in my mind’s eye the movement of those salmon, I see an image of the church as God intends it to be. John tells us that before Jesus left his disciples, he prayed for the church. Jesus prayed that the disciples “be one even as you and I are one.” Jesus prayed for the unity of the church. It is God’s will for the church, composed of many different individuals, to move as one body against the force of the stream. The Holy Spirit directs the church toward its ultimate destiny in Christ.

When we look at the church, all too often we see a fragmented body, at odds with itself and, at times, uncertain of its direction. We see a church that appears to be far from Christ’s vision of unity. In our own Presbyterian denomination, we see groups trying to divide the church because others in the church do not agree with them on social and moral issues or on questions about ordination. Is Christian unity possible only with those who agree with us on every issue in the church and society?

We confuse unity with uniformity. We think that unity means everybody thinks alike and acts alike. Lois Lowry’s novel, *The Giver*, paints a frightening picture of a society of sameness, devoid of all memory, color, emotion, desire or spark of individuality. A community built on uniformity is like living death! Christians do not all like the same flavor. Vanilla isn’t going to suit everybody. The separation of the church into different denominations, styles of worship, and congregations does not in itself destroy Christian unity. Yet, when Christians of different races, political views, positions on moral issues, backgrounds, denominations or congregations cannot work together,

support each other and pray for one another, then our unity falls far short of the goal of Christ's prayer.

Our culture does not especially value unity. Perhaps it is more precise to say that our society prizes individuality over community. In their 1985 study of American culture, *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his co-authors noted the trend toward the fragmentation of community and the celebration of individuality in modern American life. This trend threatens to destroy the social fabric of life and the institutions upon which our society depends. Taken to its extreme, this trend endangers marriage, government, ecological systems, neighborhood groups and religious organizations.

We even tend to think of religion as a private affair between the believer and God. People today don't even like to use the word "religion." It sounds too institutional for a de-institutionalized society. We prefer to talk about "spirituality." We envision spirituality as a private matter between the individual and God. We forget that Jesus called individuals into a new community of faith, which we call the body of Christ. We resist any effort to force community. We think, "You can't make me swim up that stream."

The unity for which Christ prays neither forces uniformity nor threatens individuality. We are to be one, even as Jesus and God are one. Before it is anything else, true Christian unity is unity of being. The church speaks of the mystery of the incarnation to talk about how God is present in Jesus. God becomes flesh in Jesus Christ. The church also speaks of the trinity to express how Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit are related. They are one in being and, at the same time, three distinct persons. When we encounter Jesus, we meet God. It is not simply that Jesus is the most godly, wisest, most courageous person who ever lived. It is not that Jesus knows more about God than anyone else. Jesus is the embodiment of God's glory. Paul says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto God's own self." Jesus is God. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ present with us.

Therefore, our unity with God, Jesus Christ and one another is a unity of being. We are united not by anything we have done, not by strength of will and not by any innate human capacity to be joined with another. We are united by the Holy Spirit who dwells within each one of us and in all of us together. The bond of unity in the church is the presence of God in the church. In fact, what makes the church holy is the same thing that makes the church one—the presence of the Holy Spirit. Christian unity is God's creation and not our own.

In the Book of Acts we see the power of God's unifying Spirit at work. In the sixteenth chapter of Acts, Paul and the young Christian Timothy are passing through the area then known as Asia, which today we call Turkey. The Spirit, speaking through a vision of a man in Macedonia, tells Paul to cross over from Asia to Europe. In the city of Phillipi, Paul encounters Lydia who becomes the first convert to Christianity in Europe. Lydia is a businesswoman and the head of her household. When she and her household are baptized into the faith, she invites Paul and his

friends to her home to stay. The Holy Spirit creates a new family of faith. Strangers become a part of one family. Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, and men and women of different cultures, histories, and language become one in Christ. The church is not an organization you join, but a body of which you are an essential part.

Christ prays that we might manifest in our life together the kind of spiritual unity that God has given us. Jesus speaks of three characteristics that mark this unity. First, it is a unity that reflects God's glory. Jesus has given us the glory that belongs to God. The power of the church is found in its capacity to reflect the glory of God. The church does many things that other groups do. The church feeds the hungry, offers counseling, visits the lonely, builds houses for the homeless, provides care for children, tutors struggling students, organizes special interest groups, holds exercise classes, and a thousand other things. We do these things not as an end in themselves. We do these things to manifest the glory of God. As Paul wrote, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God." If all that the world sees in the life of the church is the earthen vessel and not the spiritual treasure, then we have failed. Our prayer is for God to use the ordinary things we do to point to the extraordinary presence of God in the church. When others see our true unity then they will see the *one* God who is at work through our many ways of serving.

The second mark of Christian unity is love. Jesus prays that the church will embody God's love. Today we welcome 51 members of our confirmation class into the fellowship of the church by their profession of faith. Each one brings a unique personality, special gifts and diverse experiences to the life of our congregation. I want to challenge our confirmation class to set an example of what it means to love others in Christ's name. I want our confirmation class to hold us accountable to the command of Jesus to show the God's love to others, especially those who are least like us. I want our confirmation class to teach us what it means to welcome others from different schools, different backgrounds and different life experiences. When I was in high school, my congregation invited a community group of folks with mental handicaps to a special Sunday School Class and then to worship at our church. Before long, the congregation's welcome began to wear thin. Some said that the group was too loud and disruptive. They didn't belong there. When I heard about the decision to un-invite these folks with special needs to worship, I became disillusioned with the church. It took me a long time to overcome my disappointment with the church's failure to practice love. Love alone has the power to unite us in Christ with the stranger. When people see our love for those who are different from us, then they see the powerful unity of Christ's body.

Jesus also prayed for unity that would serve the purposes of God in the world. God makes us one in order that we may bear witness to the one God. If we cannot live together in peace in the church, then how can we offer Christ's peace to the world? If we cannot share what we have with one another in the body of Christ, then how can we help the world become good stewards of God's creation? If we cannot show mercy to one another, then how can we help the world understand true justice? We worship, pray, study, and live together as a community of faith so that the quality of our life

together will be a compelling witness to the one God we worship. When we live together as one people committed to the vision of God's kingdom, then people will see in our unity the power of the one God.

If visitors were to look at us "through the windows," as we once saw the salmon swim upstream, what would they see? Would they see the beauty of each one of us, our form and force, as we make our way against the flow? Each one of us is moving distinctly. Yet each one of us is joined in motion with everyone else for a single purpose. Reflecting God's glory, united in love, serving God's purposes in the world, we move forward. We hold firm against the heaving river of life, and then, suddenly, as if by command, we surge forward into God's future. We move as individuals. Yet, we move together as one body. United in God's Spirit, we move upwards, upwards toward our final destiny in Christ.