

Conformity vs. Community

Jesus prayed in John 17, that his followers would be One. He prayed for unity. But how are we to achieve that goal?

Through much of Christian history, the Church has sought true community through agreement. If we can all agree on correct doctrine, write the best possible statement of that doctrine, then all sign off on it, then we can truly be one. We will be of one mind, one opinion, one doctrine, one creed, one theology. In the **Core Questions** class, which we are holding on Wednesday nights (6:15pm in the Parlor) and Sunday mornings (10:45am in the Fellowship Hall), we will be exploring how the Church has tried to achieve that doctrinal uniformity over the past two millennia.

And failed. You see, there are some problems with that method. First, Jesus prayed that we should be One, not that we should be the same. Second, as we will see in our survey of Christian history, it just doesn't work. When we base our unity entirely on doctrine, what we end up doing is excluding others. (Or slaughtering them. See Session Three.) The truth is, we humans just aren't made to think exactly like everyone else. Yes, there are some core defining doctrines of Christianity, but beyond that core, none of us thinks or believes exactly like our neighbors. Even our neighbors in the next pew.

So community must be built around something other than doctrinal agreement. But what? John 17 gives us a clue. What were Jesus and the disciples doing when Jesus prayed that prayer? They were eating together. And as we examine the gospels, we find that again and again, key moments happen around the table, over a meal. When we get to the Book of Acts, we see the struggling Early Church doing the same thing. *Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2:6).*

There is something about gathering around a table and breaking bread with others. At a meal, we are reminded that we are mortal, that we cannot live without food, and that we share this dependency with every other human on earth. At a meal, we share mortality; in passing food around the table, we share strength. At a meal, it does not matter whether we share each other's opinions; only that we share the meat and potatoes.

During Lent, we will seek community through eating together. In my sermon series, "Meals with Jesus," I will explore some of those crucial moments around the table with the Lord. At each worship service in Lent, we will gather at the Lord's Table and celebrate Communion. We will be holding a church-wide potluck on March 17, and we are working to set up smaller din-ner groups in homes.

If we all have to agree in order to find community, then we're sunk. But if we seek community by bringing all our conflicting opinions together around the table, then Christ's prayer may yet be answered.