

June 9, 2019
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Oneness of All in Christ
John 17: 20-23



I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Abba God, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

The Sneetches aren't the only ones with a label maker. Maybe you have one in your home or office. They are good for some things. I appreciate that spices come with labels. I use lots of cinnamon; I sprinkle it on about everything. The chili powder looks much like the cinnamon, but I don't want it on my oatmeal. Labels can be helpful.

There are lots of labels even in church, or should I say particularly in church: evangelical, progressive, conservative, Traditionalist, Centrist, liberal, fundamentalist, Catholic, Protestant, orthodox, reform, I could probably go on all day with the list also considering the many and combinations of the above such as progressive evangelical or evangelical fundamentalist.

This summer sermon series is about one of these labels: Progressive Christianity. What is Progressive Christianity? There is not one single definition. There is not one set list of beliefs that all who call ourselves progressive must agree upon. By its very name "progressive" means it is fluid, ever growing, changing, evolving. In 1994, the Center for Progressive Christianity formed. It identified 8 points of progressive Christianity. Those 8 points are in their third revision- as people offer comments, suggestions to help give greater clarity to the journey. We continue to evolve and change- what was progressive at one time or for some people- is not for others. I'm not sure what labels you claim for yourself, but all of you are progressive by someone's standards.

If you did not arrive here by horse and buggy this morning, you are progressive according to our Amish friends. You have a woman for a pastor. You are progressive according to our Southern Baptist brothers.

Removal of racial segregation in worship would have been scandalous/progressive in this country at one time -maybe not too long ago. For some it was progressive to remove the barrier that segregated people with darker skin to the balcony- or out of the church all together. Yet, you welcomed an African American pastor to your pulpit.

Your worship might be considered progressive. Use of any musical instrument, organ, piano, guitar or drum is progressive to our Church of Christ brothers. Using something other than King James English Bible, using the Apostle's Creed vs. Nicene Creed vs. no creed, having an open table of communion, allowing children to be present, these are all steps that signal progress - newness for some - challenges for some - no big deal for others.

When we look to scripture in reference to the things we see some surprisingly "progressive" actions. Miriam, Moses' sister led the Israelite people in worship of God as they left Egypt. SHE led them with a song and a dance, with timbrel and tambourine. 'Progressive'

may be shedding layers of rigidity that were never meant to be, or returning to that which always was in the beginning.

A church that address social, economic, ecological issues, human rights, immigration, might be labeled as progressive these days, but of course, we find the very same teachings in all of the Hebrew prophets, 3000 years ago or so. Check out Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, 'Progressive' may be shedding layers of rigidity that were never meant to be, or returning to that which always was.

Progressive christianity is a label which no doubt means something different to different folks. So I went to the terribly scholarly research resource: Wikipedia to read a definition there. According to Wikipedia,

“Progressive Christianity is characterized by a willingness to question tradition, acceptance of human diversity, a strong emphasis on social justice and care for the poor and the oppressed, and environmental stewardship of the earth. Progressive Christians have a deep belief in the centrality of the instruction to "love one another" (John 15:17) within the teachings of Jesus Christ. This leads to a focus on promoting values such as compassion, justice, mercy, and tolerance, often through political activism.

Progressive Christianity can be a willingness to question tradition like Jesus did in the sermon on the Mount when he quotes Jewish law, “you’ve heard it said of old, but I say to you today...” or when he broke Jewish tradition by talking to women, healing the sick, including the children.

Progressive Christianity can be acceptance of human diversity like Paul when he said, “there is no longer male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile.”

Opponents try to scare people away from the term “Progressive” linking it to New Age, or even anti-Christ, but this progressive definition sounds pretty grounded in what I read in the Bible - especially that part about love one another. Whether it is the 8 Points from the Center of Progressive Christianity or the 11 Affirmations of the Phoenix Affirmations or some other list of progressive ideas, I find they are not new constructs. I find them all very grounded in our faith tradition thousands of years old.

We must remember the words /labels fall short, are often misunderstood, do not carry a singular definition, can offer safe place for some and create barriers for others , can put us into pigeonholes of competing tribes and colonies.

Yet, we label ourselves nonetheless. I label myself as a way for others to know me. I put a rainbow on my name tag at annual conference to say something about my beliefs without saying a word, to let others know of my support for inclusivity.

Some people choose to put bumper sticker on car to make a statement about something important to them, to identify support of a particular ideology, theology, cause, or just for fun- to make someone smile. We label ourself on our facebook page, instagram, twitter, - when we want someone (the world) to know something about who we are, what we believe, and yes, how ‘we’ are different than ‘them.’ It is the world we live in us and them divided by very real differences. Some differences that are at the core of who we see ourselves and the call of our baptismal vows to resist “ evil, injustice and oppression in whatever form they present themselves”

The problem comes when we see other's labels and decide that their label is "evil, unjust or oppressive." When we "resist evil, injustice and oppression" - like our baptismal vows encourage, -then we can also be tempted to violate - to 'exterminate,' annihilate, or crucify. Then we become the very evil which we oppose for even if we do not execute our anger and disgust of the other upon the other— if we hold it in our heart; it turns the anger inward.

According to John's Gospel, Jesus spent his last evening with his followers and friends trying to teach them one last time, offering prayers and guidance for them- knowing he was facing death - certainly focusing on that which was most important. Jesus prays, 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will come to know my way through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Abba God, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us.'

Jesus prays that we might come to know his way - a way that reveals God in Person, God in Spirit, God in the Holy Other that holds all as ONE. Jesus's shows a way to union with God in self and with others as a central core to his life and teachings. Jesus prays for the disciples in his last farewell; he offers a prayer of unity which comes forth from God's Spirit. Jesus prays for the spirit of Unity which he spent his life demonstrating.

Today is called PENTECOST, in the church, it is celebrated 50 days after the Easter celebration. As the Jewish tradition reveals in the story of Acts, "on the day of Pentecost"(Jewish festival) brought people from all over the known world into Jerusalem. When the early followers had gathered, in diverse language and custom from 'every nation under heaven' in that gathering, they all experienced God's Spirit each in 'our own language.' The Spirit honored the diversity of them all; the Spirit empowered them all to live what Jesus prayed.

We are different. We have different beliefs, passions, core convictions, different languages, different families, different loves, different labels that we chose to define ourself but somewhere. Somewhere beneath all that we believe, beneath all our egos and brokenness, beneath all that divides and separates and makes us beautifully unique, there is a mystery; there is holiness as sacred beings. There is a way to find connection to all Other, of flesh and spirit

Jesus shows us the ultimate is to reach the depths of our being to transcend the world that would divide and to find the ground of LOVE residing at the very core of our being not by going apart from, but by going within. The path that Jesus offers is not a one time challenge. It is not a one time confession. It is not a belief. It is a practice. It is a practice of prayer and meditation intent of union with God. That is not new... it is ancient.

From psalmist to prophets to mystics of ancient days who pointed the way to union with God and others, the desert fathers and mothers and saints, the founders of monastic movements, through all their writings, they exalted a mystical union with God as the Way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is unity in God, in self, in one another. It is not new. Progressive Christianity invites us to return to this ancient practice -believing the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life. May it be so.