

Focus: Jesus glues our community together with forgiveness.

In his book *Love is the Way*, PB Michael Curry writes

When I was bishop of North Carolina, a reporter asked me what the biggest challenge facing the church was. I answered him, “We’re wrestling with sexuality now, we know that. But I think the greater challenge is this: How do we make e pluribus unum—out of many, one—real, without obliterating anybody?”¹

E pluribus unum—out of many, one—is one of our national creeds. It is printed on our currency. And yet, we know, it’s easy to say *unity*, but it’s a lot harder to actually pull it off. What is it that allows a diverse community with different views about important things and with “complicated” histories to live together, to work together, not only to coexist, but to thrive? Over the next few weeks during the Easter season, we’ll be hearing stories from Acts, the early church, and hear how the spirit of the risen Christ worked in their time and is still working in ours.

And today’s reading shows that they absolutely nailed e pluribus unum! Listen to this:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

I don’t know about you, but I have never been part of a church quite like that! Biblical scholar Will Willimon explains why the power of the early church’s example was so important. He says,

The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community, that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history.²

What was the most radical thing that they did? They as the members of the church gave up all their property and redistributed it to the poor. The result? There was not a needy person among them! This is not an argument about economics so much as what it is possible when people trust each other, when everyone is “of one heart and soul,” in other words when e pluribus unum—out of many, one—becomes a present reality.

End of story, right? Well, our reading would have us believe so. But a funny thing happened along the way to the kingdom of heaven on earth. In the very next chapter, it all falls apart. You might guess what the fight is about. Money. We’re told that a husband and wife Ananias and Sapphira sold some land and held back the funds from the church but then said they donated

¹ Michael Curry, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), 185.

² William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 51.

everything. This does not end up going well for them; I'll save you the gory details which you can read in Acts 5.

Obviously folks in the church are upset. You might expect them to say, "I gave up all my money—and you're hiding some away in a Christian version of a tax shelter!? I don't think so!"

But actually what breaks up the whole project is not the money. That's just the issue it plays out in. It's the lack of trust. Peter tells them, "You have not lied to us, but to God."

So often if you've served on a vestry or a council or been to an annual meeting, or even listened to our leaders in Washington, you find out the issue's not really the money. Churches, countries, individuals for centuries have always found a way to "make-do" with what we have. No, it's the lack of trust. It's when people lie to each other, deceive each other, insult each other, don't level with each other. That's when *e pluribus unum* is lost. And you can't fix that by writing a check.

Titus and I were recently reading a story from the library called *Oopsie-Do!* by Tim Kubart.³ It begins,

Oopsies can happen and get in your way,
But that doesn't mean they should ruin your day.
Forget all the flub-ups and mess-ups you make.
No reason to fret if you make a mistake!
Just say... Oopsie-Do!

Over the remainder of the story, we will spill fish food on the floor, our backpacks will fall and dump our favorite snacks, and our spaghetti will land on our teddy. All to be solved with the same liturgical response: *Oopsie-Do!*

Now this is a children's story. I can't remember the last time spaghetti's landed on my teddy—but I can remember the last time I've said words that hurt someone, the time I've held onto a prejudice, the time I've refused to release a grudge. Those things don't just "ruin your day." They erode trust between individuals, they break bonds, they destroy community, they obliterate *e pluribus unum*.

If only there were something as easy we could say as a church as "Oopsie-Do!" right? Well, there is something we can say, but I can't promise it's easy. It goes like this:

"If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sin, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Naming sin. Being honest. Dealing with the issue. Not just with God but with each other. This is risky business, and it involves faith and trust. Faith that Jesus is always willing to forgive my sins. Trust that my neighbor will be willing to forgive my sins. Faith that I am more to God, my neighbor, and myself than my worst moment. Confession and forgiveness is always a risk, but it's what makes new life together possible. 1 John says that when we do this, we have

³ Tim Kubart, *Oopsie-Do!* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018).

fellowship, we have e pluribus unum, with each other. We are restored to that one heart, one soul that we were called to be.

Forgiveness. It is so important that notice it's the first thing the resurrected Jesus does when he appears to his disciples: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Retaining sins is easy. We do that all the time. But what is unusual, what is almost unheard of is forgiveness.

Henri Nouwen writes, "Community is not possible without the willingness to forgive one another 'seventy-seven times.' Forgiveness is the cement of community life. Forgiveness holds us together through good and bad times, and it allows us to grow in mutual love."⁴

Forgiveness is the cement, the glue that holds us together past the poorly chosen word, past the heated disagreement, past our fallen humanity and broken relationships. Forgiveness centers on the fact that each of us in this church is a sinner, one who sees through a glass darkly.

Forgiveness is what brings us to Christ, and it's what brings our neighbor to Christ, too. And in that way, forgiveness brings us together.

Forgiveness is the promise of resurrection and the reality of resurrection. What better testimony to the resurrected Christ could there be than a group of people with differences in worldviews and differences in their history burying the past and coming together with one heart and one soul to proclaim the present reality that Christ is risen?

Bp. Curry writes, "To love, my brothers and sisters, does not mean we have to agree. But maybe agreeing to love is the greatest agreement. And the only one that ultimately matters, because it makes a future follow."⁵ Forgiveness and love: now that is a recipe for the early church and for our church in the 21st century. **Amen.**

⁴ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 1997), January 21.

⁵ Michael Curry, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), 185.