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John 17:20-26
Revelation 22: 12-17, 20-21

The Scourge of Denominationalism

As many of you know, I was recently out in the California mountains for my brother's wedding. What you may not know is that ours was not the only event going on in the hotel. A conference of charismatic Christian faith healers, led by the Reverend Doctor A.L. Gill, was also there. Given that they were positioned in a large ballroom located in the critical junction between the residential wing and the conference/restaurant wing, we heard quite a lot of their meeting during our stay. During one such interlude, my sister got to hear Gill's exhortation against what he called "the scourge of denominationalism." And if you ever wondered how we get our sermon titles, well here it is. Now, despite the somewhat outdated language, this is actually a fairly common attack by non-denominational preachers. The idea is that, by organizing ourselves into groups that allows us to be identified by some name other than "Christian," like Congregational, or Presbyterian, we have fallen away from the true interpretation of scripture, which is then helpfully provided by A.L. Gill and friends. But while I disagree with Gill's interpretation and proposed solution, I don't think he's entirely wrong. But to explain why, I need to present you with a brief history of Christianity in the West. Please Bear with me.

A man washes up on a desert island and is stranded there for a few years. By the time a rescue ship shows up, he has constructed a little village in order to give himself a sense of routine and keep himself sane. He naturally wants to give his rescuers a tour and so shows them all he's built. "here's my house, with my kitchen and my bedroom, here's the fishing area, where I catch fish and clean them, over here is where I wash my clothes, and that building there, that's my church." The rescuers notice one building he hasn't mentioned, and so ask him what it is. "Oh, that? That's the other church. I used to go there, but didn't like the direction they were headed, so I started this one."

So, basically, that's what we've been doing for centuries. The church in Rome didn't like the way the church in Constantinople was going, so they split. Martin Luther didn't like the way the church in Rome was going, so his followers split off. John Calvin didn't think Luther had it quite right, so his followers split off from them. Henry VIII had his own issues, so he split. And naturally, some folks thought Henry's church had gotten too corrupt, so they wanted to purify it and bring about Independent governance. When they came to the United States, they called themselves Congregationalists. So this is how we came to have the Orthodox, the Lutherans, the Reform, the Anglicans, and the Congregationalists, with the Presbyterians and the Methodists and Baptists and various flavors of Lutherans coming along as well. And, finally, we now have a variety of nondenominational movements who didn't like the way the denominations were going and so go their own way.

The reading from Revelation today gives us the core reason for this human desire to break off and be separate in our churches. In Revelation, John of Patmos gives us the words of Jesus, that he will be coming, the first AND the last, the alpha and the omega. And when he does, there will be a sorting. Those who wash their garments will be allowed inside the city gates with Jesus, and others will be left outside the gate with the adulterers and murderers and fornicators, and also with Jesus, but not in a good way. This is scary stuff. If you read the rest of the book of Revelation, you'll see just how scary this prospect of being left outside is. At some level, this is, after all, why we come to church! Jesus has told us that we are the beloved of God, but it is hard to believe that someone, even God, could actually be as generous and loving as Jesus showed us. So we get a little nervous about where we stand. What if we ARE some of the people slated to be left on the outside of the gates when the day comes? How can we know that we're safe? We need some reassurance that we have taken up the offer to drink the water of life and done it right. Even though Jesus tells us to drop our fear, we can't. And as long as we have that fear, we need to convince ourselves that we're on the right side of history. But how do we do that?

We do that by making sure that we can identify the poor soul who is left outside. Denominations, or broader groupings like Mainline and Evangelical, Protestant and Catholic, provide an easy way to do this. They provide us with a THEM we can differentiate from US. We're not like THEM. THEY are embarrassing. THEY aren't real Christians. These days we don't tend to use the old favorite, "THEY are going to Hell," like our Puritan ancestors did, but

the sense is still there that THEY are wrong and WE are right. Heck, I felt it out in Big Bear. At some point I felt the need to tell a complete stranger in the hot tub, "I'm a minister, but from the non-judgy branch of the church." We fear being associated with "crazies" or "bible thumpers" or any number of other things, and so find a way to build up a wall between THEM and US, so that we know WE are inside the city because THEY are outside the gates. And this need to build walls is the true scourge of denominationalism. While most of the denominations these days do good work and share similar missions, providing resources to their congregations and insurance for their ministers, they were founded on fracture. The existence of denominations, and self-identified non-denominational churches is a reminder that we have been unable to accept that Jesus's message was so short and simple, "Love God and Love your Neighbor." Instead, we build walls to keep our neighbors out and, in so doing, we keep out God.

But there have, in history, been some remarkable individuals and institutions that saw these walls for what they were and decided it was time to tear some down. Way back in the 1930s, some Congregational church leaders and some German Evangelical and Reform church leaders flipped a few pages back in the Bible and moved from John of Patmos to John the Evangelist. They re-read what Jesus wanted for his followers. In the seventeenth chapter of John, Jesus prays for us. Key among his desires, that all his followers be one with each other and with God. "Oh God, I pray that they may all be one. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one." Jesus could not be more clear here. He wants all his followers to set aside their differences, embrace the love of God and their neighbor, and become one. **THIS IS THE REASON HE CAME**, according to this prayer.

So way back in the 1930s, these church leaders read this prayer and said, maybe it is time for us to stop being so nervous about whether we are inside or outside the gates, and trust that Jesus knew what he was doing. Maybe we can accept the gift that Jesus has given us. Perhaps, in this great and progressive era, the time is right for a United Church. And so, like all good church folk, they formed up a committee. And over the next twenty years, they had a back and forth, and they worked on documents, and the Yankees introduced the Germans to the true implications of Congregational independence, and the Germans introduced the Yankees to the joys of church unity and discipline, and along the way they lost some congregations, but in the end those Midwestern Germans and those northeastern Yankees came together and said, "We will be a

United Church, of Christ. And we will take the words of St. John as our motto, that they may all be one." And this, my friends, is the tradition that we now inherit. Not a denomination built on fracture, but a philosophy built on unity. Indeed, the years following the formation of our United Church saw a grand consultation on church union that hoped to unify the Lutherans, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, and a few others. But they all chickened out, leaving us, as a United Church, struggling alone with our identity as a post-denominational denomination.

And so, in our struggle, we're still afraid of being left outside, just as we were left alone in our experiment by the other denominations. We still worry that we aren't on the right side of history, just a little bit. We still talk about the things the UCC does as if there is a "they" out there in Cleveland that is different than "us." We identify ourselves as Congregational first and members of the United Church second. We don't think about what it means to be part of a United Church. And so we start sketching out little walls in our head. This struggle with giving up our walls is the joy and the hurt of being a United Church. Tearing down walls means sharing space with people and ideas that might be challenging to us, or that might bring us unexpected energy and renewal. We never know what we'll find in this new frontier of a church founded on Christian unity.

But what we do know is here in Second Church, the "they" of the UCC are "us". When Angie goes off to Cleveland every quarter for UCC Wider Church Ministries meetings, she carries our hopes and dreams with her. More locally, the same goes for Bonnie and Alan when they head to Framingham for the meetings of the Massachusetts Conference Board of Directors each month. Every Sunday during the school year, a UCC seminarian is here in worship, and when we run out of those, members of this congregation hear the call to step up and serve God by preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments. There is no, "they." We are the United Church, living the message of the United Church. If you doubt that, look around you. We are a church full of people who did not expect to be here. Whether it was the seeming three score of you who grew up catholic, or Roger and Mary Sue, who were sure they would be Baptist before the men of the church showed up on their doorstep fifty years ago, or the seminarian at the most prominent and prestigious evangelical seminary in New England proudly wearing a comma that says "God is Still Speaking" out there in the pews. We are united in our mission. And that is the hope and promise of the United Church, that whoever you are, wherever you are on life's

journey, you are welcome here as a beloved child of God. Say it loud, say it proud, We are the United Church, of Christ. And we share Christ's prayer, that they may all be one.