

Walking

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

May 15, 2011, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

John 17:18-26

I John 1:5-2:2

As you know, I do not often refer to myself in the pulpit and therefore offer these somewhat personal reflections as a preface to this morning's proclamation, lest they distract us from our hearing of the gospel. Thirty-three years ago this very week, as I helped to prepare the elements for a celebration of the Lord's Supper at the service of worship concluding our church's General Assembly in San Diego, the Assembly that would vote to ban avowed, practicing homosexuals from ordination to the offices of deacon, elder and minister of Word and Sacrament, I remember mostly my own hot tears. As a part of the committee charged with planning worship for that Assembly, we had anticipated the admixture of pain and triumph that might divide those invited, at the end of a bitter debate, to come to the Lord's table, none of us knowing at the beginning of the week whether pain or triumph would be our lot at the end.

The truth be told, pain and division has been the common lot of all Presbyterians since that Assembly in 1978. Even so, this has never ceased to be the church I love and with whom I have quarreled for most of my ministry because of her categorical rejection of the gifts of so many for ministry; this has never ceased to be the church I love and from whom I could never depart, in spite of the urging of many who wished those of us gone or silenced who, in subjection to the church's governance, have doggedly worked for a church as just and generous as the gospel.

Thirty-three years later, I stand before you undone by the news that the part of the church into which I was baptized and confirmed and ordained is about to become a church whose ordered life means to make room for all--for those who cannot in good conscience ordain gay and lesbian Christians and for those who finally are permitted to follow their conscience in the calling of officers and ministers to leadership in the church without regard to sexual orientation:--to the end that together we may love one another and seek to live, by God's grace, into the church's oneness in Christ.

With those personal remarks as a preface, we turn this morning to consider, in the face of a decision whose inclusion of some will spell the chosen exclusion of others, what it means to believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Sermon timers, start your clocks now! Not one but two texts will guide us. From I John and from John's gospel:

“If we say we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world....I ask not only on behalf of these, but on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.”

What has it meant, in the history of the church, to say, “I believe in the one, holy, apostolic church”? In the first place--ironically, paradoxically, tragically--it has meant schism. “The door into the presence of Jesus is always unlatched. But it swings both ways,” wrote preacher and teacher Donald Miller a half century ago, on the cusp of the social upheaval that marked the steady decline of so-called mainline Protestantism in the 1960’s. “As Bunyan’s Pilgrim discovered on his journey to the Celestial City,” Miller goes on, “the traffic on that road flows both ways. Many have gone on pilgrimage with Jesus, only to turn back to a way of their own, or to follow some other leader.”

Consider the situation addressed in a sermon a few of us in this sanctuary know intimately as the Letter to the Hebrews, a sermon imploring a congregation of new Christians not to walk in the face of persecution, but to hold fast to the faith. I think also of Paul who chastised Christians in Corinth for their divisions into factions—some belonging to Chloe, to Paul, to Apollos, to Cephas, to Christ. “Has Christ been divided?” he rails. “Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Likewise the author of I John, writing about 70 years after Christ’s resurrection, addresses a congregation threatened with schism and ready to walk due to dissident teachers disputing the humanity of Jesus, claiming that Jesus had not “come in the flesh”. A few hundred years and a few dozen contrary teachers later, the church began to settle upon a common text—the canon of the Old and New Testaments—as well as a common creed—the Nicene--that confessed the church to be one. A millennium and a handful of popes later, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg while Zwingli began preaching through the Book of Matthew in the Grossmunster Cathedral of Zurich, unintentionally shattering the visible oneness of the church by what came to be known as the Reformation. You could say, as heirs of the Reformation, Protestants in particular have schism in our blood, were it not for the fact that, according to Scripture, it has ever been thus in the church.

“It is an impossible situation,” rants Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* as he reflects on the church’s creed: *credo unam ecclesiam* [I believe in one church],

that whole groups of Christian communities should exhibit a certain external and internal unity among themselves and yet stand in relation to other groups of equally Christian communities in an attitude of more or less exclusion. It is an impossible situation that such groups should confront each other in such a way that their confession and preaching and theology are mutually contradictory, that what is revelation here is called error there, that what is heresy here is taught and revered as dogma there, that the order and cultus and perhaps the ethics of one should be found and called strange and alien and unacceptable and perhaps even reprehensible by the other, that the adherents of the one should be able to work together with those of the other in every possible

secular cause, but not to pray together, not to preach and hear the Word of God together, not to keep the Lord's Supper together. It is an impossible situation that either tacitly or expressly, with an open severity or a gentler friendliness, the one should say to the other, or, in fact, give it to be understood, or at any rate think of the other: You have another Spirit; You are not within but without; You are not what you presumptuously call yourselves, the community of Jesus Christ.

In sum, to confess belief in one church has led some to claim exclusive truth for the church that is theirs, ironically making the church's oneness impossible. Not a few of my colleagues in the Presbyterian Church and likely a few of you in these pews this morning dwell in precisely this impossible situation. In the months ahead, some will renounce the oneness of the church in favor of a creating a body—or some imagine a separate body within this Presbyterian body—pure from the defilement of what they consider wrong beliefs and practices. My colleagues have told me that many in their congregations may walk and some of them may yet lead their congregations to walk. One of those colleagues, already in the process of taking his congregation to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, embraced me at the last Presbytery meeting and asked if I hated him. “Of course not,” I replied truly. “I am deeply saddened and the church is greatly diminished by your leaving.” Then he stunned me, saying in so many words, “It was a whole lot easier to leave the church before I came to know you and know that there are Christians with whom I disagree who are as Christ-centered and biblically grounded as you are.” I offer this not as a self-serving remark, but as a strange glimmer of light in the darkness of the church's potential schism.

What then might it look like, in the second place, to believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church? Again, it is walking, according to John, but walking in the light of Christ with one another, not because we like one another or agree, but because we have been given to each other to be one in Christ. “What does this mean?” asked Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his lectures to seminarians in Finkenwalde on *Life Together*. “My brother,” he writes, my sister “is the other...who has been redeemed by Christ, delivered from...sin, and called to faith and eternal life. Not what a [person] is in himself [in herself] as a Christian, his spirituality and [her] piety, constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our [fellowship] is what the [one] is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.” This is the oneness of the church and God knows it is not a human accomplishment! Rather, the church's unity is a gift to be received from the God who so loved the world, who loved the world in this way: that in Christ God took upon himself our hatred and divisions and death-dealing, dying for us all while we were yet sinners, that we may be one in him eternally: that we may have eternal life.

In this sense, writes theologian Scott Bader-Saye, “The unity of Christ's followers is not incidental to our salvation. As we are made one with Christ, so we are made one with the Father. But we are one with Christ only if we are one with each other. Our fellowship with God depends upon our unity, as does our witness to the world—we are to be one ‘so that the world may believe.’” Yet with billboards proclaiming the end of the world on May 21 and believers on street corners warning sinners to

repent lest we spend eternity in hell, I imagine the eternal irony to be this: members of the one true church will arrive at the room God has made for them in Christ only to be greeted by the very ones who were destined for eternal damnation because they neither believed nor behaved as they ought. Just read the parables of Jesus if you think this is far-fetched! Given such a jarring revelation, those believing themselves still to be members of the one true church will walk: will choose to spend eternity with their own rather than with the unsavory crowd that is God's own, thus confirming their rejection of the heresy known as universalism! "The world's love of its own is quite different from God's love of [God's] own," observes theologian Clinton Morrison in what I admit is a bit of a cheap shot. "The one is the affection of [the] dying... for whatever supports them in their anxiety (and their hate of whatever threatens their security); the other is the willingness to die in communicating the one security and possibility of life (and the rejection of all other securities and dominating motives)."

However things shake down in the part of Christ's church that is Presbyterian over the next few months, those of us left to walk together simply because we choose not to walk, will find ourselves in the pews next to a number of folks whom we do not like or with whom we vehemently disagree and yet whom we are given to love as Christ has loved us. This is the light in the darkness that I glimpsed with my colleague who is walking away more reluctantly because, for a few months in the midst of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, we walked together in the light of Christ. We came to know one another not in the heat of an argument about sex but in the hand of the God who has kept us both from falling.

I offer this glimpse of the oneness of the church going forward not meaning to be a Pollyanna! Let me assure you, looking out from the pulpit, I see the myriad of sibling rivalries that exist among this gathering of the divided who remain together. We will continue to remind each other every day of how messy the humanity of Christ's church can be. Nevertheless, the witness we are given to make in the world is precisely this: the witness of God's own who, in all our divisions and disagreements, will lay down our lives for each other so that the world God so loved may believe.

Precious Lord, take our hand, the church sings as she walks together: lead her on, let her stand; she is tired, she is weak, she is worn; through the storm, through the night, lead her on to the light; precious Lord, take our hand, lead us home.