

Being the Church at Brentwood

Living in Unity with Christ

Ps 4 & 1 John 3:1-7
(Hymns – 248, 356, 358, 368)

April 22, 2012

The primary focus of this first letter written by the beloved disciple is to witness to the power and purpose of living in unity with God through one's relationship with Jesus Christ.

That's what being part of the church here at Brentwood, and in every other congregation of Christian disciples around the world, is all about.

But why does the central message in this letter written almost 2000 years ago remain so important in our day?

Yesterday's *Vancouver Sun* contained an article on a study done last year by the Vancouver Foundation.

They asked a variety of community leaders what the issues were that concerned them most.

The findings surprised the investigators.

Isolation was the most common concern that emerged.

Not homelessness, not the economy, not the environment, but something more personal and powerful.

It had to do with the lack of a sense of belonging, a sense of not being part of a community with a meaningful purpose.

Newcomers to Vancouver reported great difficulty in making connections and finding new friends in this city reputed to be one of the best places to live in North America. People didn't feel a sense of cohesion and community in this most secular of cities in Canada.

From other studies, we know that people in Vancouver, indeed throughout the Pacific North West (what Doug Todd calls *Cascadia*), reject religion as represented by traditional religious communities while still claiming to be spiritual in a wide variety of ways.

Dominant themes in this spirituality include personal freedom and a 'do-it-yourself' optimism.

What, then, does the Gospel as presented by John
have to say in such a context?

The Gospel, quite simply, says that humans are not meant to be alone.

We are meant to be in community, to belong in a meaningful way.

That's a key message in our day
as people feel more and more isolated and alone
in the midst of the crowds gathering in our cities.

We are made for community with God and with others.

We flourish fully in healthy relationship with God, others, and ourselves.

We are freed from the numbing fear of loneliness and isolation
by becoming part of the family of God in unity with Jesus Christ.

God is our loving father.

Jesus Christ is our loving brother.

The Holy Spirit is our loving mother.

Together, they form a community of compassion and acceptance
that fulfills our deepest aspirations and needs as human beings.

God's great love has made us his children
by what he did in Jesus Christ

and makes available to all through the work of the Holy Spirit.

In this congregation, that love is first experienced
in the authentic warmth of the welcome
people experience when they walk through the door.
It's a love that continues to enfold and nourish people
as they return for worship, become involved in learning,
take part in fellowship, and go into the world to serve.

All of this, to the degree that we do it faithfully,
arises from the depth of our unity with Jesus Christ.

It is God's love in Christ,
growing continuously among us by the work of the Holy Spirit,
that generates the love people experience in this community.

It is the same love that generates our hope for a flourishing future.

We are convinced that this community of the friends of Jesus Christ,
here in North Burnaby, BC,
is crucial to the health and well-being of this community.

Our witness and work makes a difference.

We would be missed if we closed this congregation.
We nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
in ways that improve the well-being of the creation.
Living, by God's grace, in unity with Jesus Christ
makes us blessings in this world.

But what about all the talk of sin in this passage?

John is serious about sin.
It's a real threat to our unity with Christ.
It consists, in essence, of a rejection of that relationship.
It is rebellion against being with and doing the will of God.
It is thinking we can do it on our own.
It is cutting ourselves off unity with Christ.
God's will is revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ.
He not only modeled, but also made possible, a life lived in unity with God.

John's message is that sin is taken away in Jesus Christ.
If we live in unity with Christ, we live in his purity.
If we live in unity with Christ, we live in his righteousness.

His purity and righteousness
come not from conformity to a set of rules
or agreement with a set of ideas,
but from an intimacy with God.
In his intimate love for God,
a love that grows in response to God's love for him,
he finds his heart and mind formed by and faithful to
God's will for a flourishing creation guided by love and blessing.

Anything that contradicts the divine will that we love,
anything that separates us from our maker and sustainer,
anything that denies or rebels against our true calling
to be mature children of the God
who created, redeemed, and sustains all that is – that is sin.

And Christ, with his generous gift of living in unity with him,
has taken the punishment for that sin upon himself
and freed us by forgiveness for flourishing life.

How do we maintain that unity?

There are three simple practices that have profound impacts.

Praying daily – several times – reminds us of God's presence and power.

Reading and reflecting on the Scriptures daily,
using the inserts each week to allow the Spirit to work in your soul
to unfold the witness of the Scriptures to the love of Jesus Christ.

Blessing those that you encounter
with a smile, a kind word, a helping hand,
an invitation to enjoy unity with Christ at Brentwood Presbyterian Church

These are simple practices, easily forgotten and ignored
as we get caught up in the fear and anger of isolation
in the midst of crowded and callous cities.

Living in unity with Christ,
being constantly nourished by the love of God in Jesus Christ,
we can be a community where people find welcome,
where people experience acceptance and forgiveness,
where people begin to understand how life can flourish,
where people are nourished to flourish in the service of others.

That is the calling of this congregation.
By God's grace, week after week,
we are renewed to answer that call for the coming week
with joyful gratitude
for the love and light of God we experience in unity with Christ.

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