

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: John 17:20-23

Sermon Title: "Curious Math: That They May be One" (World Communion Sunday)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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**{SLIDE 1}** Today is World Communion Sunday. It is the day that churches around the world come together and celebrate their Christian unity through the sacrament of Communion, the Lord's Supper. Churches in the world may celebrate Communion once a month or every Sunday, but today we agree to eat the bread and drink the cup to show the world that we are united under Christ in love.

**{SLIDE 2}** This tradition started back in 1934, when Pastor Hugh Thomson Kerr came up with the notion, while he was the moderator of the General Assembly of the US Presbyterian Church. Pastor Kerr had a Stewardship Committee in his church, and they talked up the idea of bringing "churches together in a [worship] service of Christian unity – in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another." In 1936 the US Presbyterian Church adopted the idea and subsequently so did other denominations. In 1940,

the Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches) endorsed World Communion Sunday and began to promote it to Christian churches worldwide.<sup>1</sup> And here we are today. It doesn't matter where the church is, it doesn't matter in which languages they hold services and do ministry, today we have decided that we should join together, celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through the Lord's Supper. We come together and we thank God that we are fellow brothers and sisters with God as our Father.

**{SLIDE 3}** Way before 1934, there was another Person who had unity on his mind: Jesus Christ. He was having his last supper with his disciples, although they really did not understand that it was their last meal together. Jesus was giving them last minute instructions before Judas would show up with a detachment of soldiers with the purpose of arresting Jesus on some trumped-up charges.<sup>2</sup> Jesus gives instructions but he also prayer for his disciples. Jesus also prays for the world. Speaking to God the Father, he says, "I ask not only on behalf of these [around me] but also on behalf of those who will believe in me

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Communion\\_Sunday](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Communion_Sunday) and <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/special-days-and-emphases/world-communion-sunday/>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John 18:1-9.

through their word, that they may all be one.”<sup>3</sup>

{SLIDE 4} It is an interesting idea that Jesus has: that all his followers would be one. Jesus looks for unity, cohesiveness, harmony, agreement. But it seems that Jesus wants more than that. Look at the curious mathematics that he brings to the forefront. “That they may be one.” One is greater than zero, and one is less than 2 or 10 or 100. If you add one to one, you get two. If you had one to those two you get three and, of course, the number continues to increase every time to add one. But in Jesus’ understanding of spiritual mathematics, one plus one equals one. One plus one plus one hundred still equals one. Not many, just one. The number one never increases but stays the same.

{SLIDE 5} How does this work? Jesus wants us to understand how close we are to each other. We may be separate beings with different gifts and talents, we may have different sizes and shapes, skin color and hair styles and clothing selections; and yet according to Jesus we are not separated, isolated, detached – we are one. In our worship we come together as one. We are not in our separate pews or chairs, we are not in our separate church buildings, we are joined together to be one people worshipping our Lord and Savior.

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<sup>3</sup> John 17:20-21.

Your worship is mine, and my worship is yours. In our ministry we come together as one. We are not doing our own thing, keeping up our work so you better keep up yours. We are joined together in ministry, speaking of the same Savior, serving the same God. Your service is mine and my service is yours. Whatever you do affects me, and whatever I do affects you. Any struggle you face, I struggle along with you, and any struggle I face you struggle long with me. Your triumphs are mine, and my triumph are yours. We are stuck together, bonded to each other through Christ. Jesus looks for more than just unity, cohesiveness, harmony, agreement. It runs deeper than that. Jesus looks for us to be one. That number never increases.

{SLIDE 6} This spiritual mathematics, however, doesn't happen among ourselves. In other words, we are not the ones to produce oneness amongst ourselves, because what ends up happening is that we become separated. Eventually we give in to our own ideas and isolate ourselves from others. My struggles are my, so leave me alone. My triumphs are mine, so you praise me for what I can do. We are no longer one but many. We become "us" and "them," with "them" being the enemy with whom we will not associate.

We talked extensively about this when we explored

the letters of Paul to the Corinthians. They had a lot of division to deal with. We can look to history and see how Christians organized denominations separate from other denomination, and even those well-established groups of people split in two and started yet more denominations. We are not just divided among religious beliefs but also socio-economic lines. The one percent don't care about anyone else, the poor remain poor, and the middle class are stuck in the middle. Protests have raged in Charlottesville and Ferguson, as well as in DC and NYC and other cities. The camps are being set up. The dividing line is marked in the dirt. Each side screams at the other, and there is no understand, no love.

If Jesus trusted us to uphold the spiritual mathematics that he speaks of in John 17, we would have made a complete mess of it. We would no longer one but many. We would become "us" and "them."

**{SLIDE 7}** But then Jesus never insisted that we uphold the concept of oneness by ourselves. Jesus came up with the mathematics, and he makes sure that it remains solid among his followers. "I ask that they may be one," Jesus prays, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely

one...”<sup>4</sup> Jesus doesn’t call for us to hold each other together. Jesus desires for his followers to be held together by the Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, who is the greatest expression of one in the universe.

**{SLIDE 8}** The Trinity. Many times we try to figure out who the Trinity is. Many theologians may wrestle and argue about God being Three-in-One, being three Persons who are of the same substance or essence, but we really cannot understand what that substance is other than to see God is spirit. But what does that mean, since we cannot hold onto spirit? Theologians may wrestle and argue about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being coeternal, meaning they all last forever, and coequal, meaning that Jesus isn’t greater than God or God and Jesus aren’t greater than the Holy Spirit. Even now, your eyes might be glazing over because you have no idea what I am talking about. When we talk about who the Trinity is, we get confused. We may lose interest and feel like we have gained no ground.

**{SLIDE 9}** But instead of talking about who the Trinity really is, we should talk about the relationship. We should talk about that close bond that God has with God’s self. God the Father loves God the Son with a great affection that we can hardly imagine. God

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<sup>4</sup> John 17:20, 21, 23.

the Son loves God the Holy Spirit with the same great affection. And God the Father loves God the Holy Spirit with no less love. They have an infinite love, a powerful friendship, a deep fellowship that even sin cannot separate. There is no separating God from God, the Father from the Son or the Spirit from the other two. Our God is truly one, so much so that when we speak of three we are always speaking of one, one God. There is a saint from 300AD, Gregory of Nazianzus, who said, “I cannot think on the one [God] without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit]; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.”<sup>5</sup>

There is no detachment, no division, no anger in the Trinity. They are in perfect and complete relationship with each other. Their oneness extends out to us. Our perfect and complete God desires for us to be one among ourselves, and to be one in God.

**{SLIDE 10}** Our Three-in-One holds us together. Our Awesome and Loving Trinity joins us to each other in fellowship, in worship, in studying, in prayer, in service, in every part of our spiritual journey. We are taken in by our one true God. To be in something means that we are part of it. We are enclosed and

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion 2, The Library of Christian Classics, Volume XXI*, 141.

encased and sealed in. We participate in that which has welcomed us in. If we are welcomed into a family, we become a part of that family. If we are welcomed in to someone's house for a celebration, we are full participants of that celebration.

If we are *in* the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then we are a part of them and they are a part of us. We have them in our lives and they will never leave us. Whatever they do affects us, and whatever we do affects them. Any struggle we face, the Trinity faces. Whatever triumphs we have, it is our Three-in-One God's great triumph.

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit want us to be in constant fellowship with them and they hope we never leave them. We bond together with our God. We grow in faith in our God, and our response is to work together and let the message of Christ get out to many.

Many people are looking to belong. We want to be a part of something. Jesus has already prayed for them, hoping that they may turn to him as Savior of all. Jesus hopes that they receive the invitation to belong to a large fellowship of believers and to belong to the God who created all things and redeems all things for everlasting life. There is no more searching: be in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as they desire to be in you. Be one in God and be one with each other.

{SLIDE 11} There was a vision over 80 years ago to bring Christians together. The dream was that we wouldn't see ourselves as separate beings in separate churches doing our separate things. Something had to be found that we could all celebrate, and that one thing could point us once more to Jesus who prayed for our unity so many years ago. The Lord's Supper is that something, the Sacrament, we all celebrate on the first Sunday of October. Churches around the world have said, "We will join with other churches today, and we will eat the bread and drink the cup, remembering the One who died and rose for us, remembering that it is always his great desire for us to be one." We drop the individual ideas. Let slide the personal opinions. Refuse to place people in camps, where it is "us" and "them." We are we. We are one under Christ. He prayed for it – he wants it to be our reality. Let us celebrate this Communion with a mind for unity. Let us eat the bread and drink the cup, showing the world that Christ unites all peoples and nations in love.

## Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news: God's mercy is poured out like a mighty river. God's grace flows like a never-ending stream. Whatever we have done and whatever we have failed to do are washed away. We are made clean. We are raised up. We are forgiven and set free in the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God, amen.