

FROM THE PULPIT

Jesus calls us to unity with others

Religion seems the cause of many of our world's "relationship" problems. More accurately, the misuse of "religion" causes problems. Glancing at the news reveals conflicts between Christian and Muslim, Sunni and Shiite, Hindu and Buddhist and even fragmentation inside the various faith movements. Pick a group, and you'll find people trying to separate themselves from each other. Is this God's fault or his desire? No way.

It is we humans, allowing our personal goals, prejudices, insecurities and misunderstandings to drive a wedge between people. We try to excuse it as "God's will," but it's not. People are of ultimate worth to God, and relationship (love) is critical.

People who want to encounter the living God, and learn of his ways, should also find ways to live that reflect the love that he has for everyone. Instead, we choose to focus on things that separate us into "us" and "them," rather than on those truths and understandings that we have in common.

Our actions as individuals, congregations and global faith communities often reinforce those walls of separation. So,

while it's somewhat easy for us in the central United States to ask questions such as "why can't the Jews and Palestinians just get along?," we face divisions right here in our community, with multiple congregations from the same denomination, often because the people attending one congregation chose to disagree about some trivial item in the past.

This fragmentation became more obvious this week, when I received a "faith-based" e-mail survey, asking whether a Christian church should "throw out" members who believed in "X-Y-Z" (pick a divisive topic). What a stupid question. And even stranger, more than 70 percent of those "faith and values" people who responded said yes! They were in favor of more division and separation. Ouch. No wonder the world doesn't put much "faith" in churches today, and especially "Christianity."

The Scripture record provides a clear overview of Jesus' desires. The night before his death, Jesus prayed in the garden, struggling with what was ahead: the abuse, trial, sentencing, physical suffering and death. Even knowing what was

in his "tomorrow," he prayed for his disciples, and Jesus prayed for you and me!

"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one... And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me." (John 17:20-22 New Living Translation, emphasis added)

Jesus wants us to work toward unity. He doesn't want mindless "robots," but Jesus is looking for followers who recognize that we have many things in common, and if we build on those common truths and understandings, we can work together to bring great good into our world. Jesus' wants "the world" to see unity as "God's way" toward peace and reconciliation.

Each of us travels a spiritual journey through this mortal life on earth. We are each invited to find God's truths, in small and large ways, and to respond to those truths in a way that is inclusive and inviting. Christians especially should be role models, inviting everyone to "keep searching," and to act for the good of all.

Review your personal and church life. Find attitudes and actions that cause "separation," and begin to remove them. Examples of divisive attitudes: "we are the one true church," "do it my way or you're going to hell," and separating "us and them" (inside or outside the church).

God's loving invitation extends to all people everywhere. There is no one that is outside God's love and family, unless they personally choose to be there. It is not the role of any church to exclude anyone, but rather to invite, encourage and welcome, in a spirit of unity.

May you be blessed, as you choose to grow daily in your relationship with God's Spirit, and as you choose to work toward unity with others.

Remember: God loves you unconditionally, and wants you to find him and choose to be with him. Search until you find a church family that helps you meet the "living, loving God," who knows you personally, and wants to be your life partner.

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