

Session 1

Dr. Kinney

This is the day that the Lord has made and we will certainly rejoice and be glad in it. I am grateful to the God who gives us this day and I am so extremely appreciative of the invitation and the opportunity to share with my United Methodist family in these Bible studies in this season.

If I could take a point of privilege, my roots with United Methodism go way back. I grew up in the Simpson United Methodist Church in Wheeling, West Virginia. My father was the lay leader of our local congregation. My mother was a lay speaker for the State of West Virginia. As my own journey in course, took me in another directions.

I can remember Dick Solon now, one of my professors and a dear friend and brother trying to guide me back to United Methodism. And I told him I could never really leave because all of my formative factors and influence in my early upbringing were shaped by that sense in United Methodist Church. And I remember categories such as central jurisdiction and then when we were yoked with another church. And I was grateful even as the Dean of the School of Theology of Virginia Union University to seek relationship with the United Methodist Church and have the school listed by the University Senate as a center for the preparation of United Methodist pastors and the countless numbers of pastors in this annual conference that I've had the privilege of sitting with and learning context.

And I am extremely grateful for this moment. To our esteemed Bishop, I thank her for extending this opportunity and I wanna thank each and every one of you for having the courage to address the theme that you are addressing.

As you consider that 17th chapter of John and the 20th, through the 23rd verses where Jesus makes what some people have called an unanswered prayer, a prayer that we might be one And the intention and the commitment to explore the whole issue of unity and oneness in a time when there is so much division in this nation in the world and even may I say in the midst of a body Of Christ. I'm grateful.

This annual conference has the courage, the discernment and the will to talk about oneness and unity in a season of division. Bioethicists have said in times past that in a polluted environment in order to survive, lifeforms adapt downward. That is when you analyze life forms, the context and the environmental conditions created by the context engender an expression within the life form that adapts downward, according to the pollution and division has become so normative for the character of our life together that I fear that sometimes even in the church, we let the pollution of division dictate the character of our relationships in the body of Christ.

This is not to say there will not be sometimes stark and significance divisions, not divisions, but differences. And it's clearly not to say that oneness does a way with diversity. But the real question is how do you live with division, with a difference and diversity without seeding authority to the powers of division where God's children can no longer walk together and not get weary. So I thank you for taking on this task.

Now, I want to acknowledge at the outset that I am not a biblical scholar. In practice and profession, I teach theology. As a local pastor, theology is a significant part of even how I preach and teach. It's very real, since I will not get into the nuances of Johanna and literature, nor a linguistic analysis, I have spent time going through numerous commentary talking about this and all of the diverse interpretations of this unity and oneness. And you even encounter those who saying, let's not talking about oneness among each other, but holding this incompleteness in each of us as individuals that we are want to be one, we want to be whole. But I wanna suggest that as I did search for meaning in this

text, that there is a clear suggestion and powerful prayer that calls us to a sense of unity and oneness in a fashion that does not embrace the normative categories of this world that are always inviting us to divide.

Throughout the revelation of God, God in creation, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the God creates with a sense of oneness and unity, Jesus exists and ministers to restore and to reconcile the fragmentations that have occurred and the fundamental is essential and basic, identity and mission of the church calls us to a ministry of the restoration that enables us to transcend the barriers of brokenness and create a new community that in a very real sense functions as an agent of a new heaven and the new earth characterized by authentic communion and calling us back to the design of creation, from creation to consummation.

The very movement, the very character, the very design, the very intent of God is into this unity or that we might be one. This is not some oneness that is a form of conformity through allegiance to a code, a framework or a system. But this is a deeper type of oneness that calls us to the core of our existence and our being. It is oneness of heart, oneness of vision, oneness and unity in purpose. It is relational oneness where there may be all kinds of differences, but the spirit that animates us and the vision that calls us and really orders and directs our steps is one of the unity and oneness evident in every one of God's disclosive activities. This oneness. And at the heart of this matter of oneness, I would suggest is God. His oneness is affirmed, celebrated and pursued when God is at the center. Not a doctrine, not a politic, not a culture. And if I even may say this, not even a religion but God. When God is at the center, the impress of true communion compels and claims us to a way of of being that transcends the normativity of fragmentation, brokenness, alienation, division, hierarchy, and affirmation of that which promotes self-wow engendering violation, objectivecation and abuse of somebody else or the rest of creation. I wanna suggest that we wanna examine this text. This text, in John 17:20-23, by reflecting on God's design and God's ultimate intent and our calling to be embodied manifestations of the design, the desire and the intent.

In our first lesson today, we're gonna talk about being one, the design, the deviation and the deliverance. And our lesson on tomorrow, we will talk about being one, the devotion, the diversity and the destiny. Today, the design, the deviation or distortion, and the deliverance from the distortion. If we were to stop and look and we begin by examining just reading the scripture, the chosen scripture that focuses our theme in John 17:20, I'm reading from the New Revised Standard version. I asked not only on behalf of these but for those who will believe in me through their word that they may all be one as you father or you creator and I are. That they may be one as in me and I am in you, may it also be in us so that the world may believe that you have said to me, the glory that you have given me, I've given to them. So they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me that they may become completely one so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Now, just for a basic overview, this in a very real sense, when Jesus is saying, "I'm not just praying for my immediate disciples those who are of this nascent circle of believers who have come to know me on a deeper level." You can go back to verse 11. And in verse 11, he says, he indicates, "Now I'm no longer in the world, but they are in the world. I'm coming to you, Holy father protect them in your name that you have given me. That they may be one as you and I are one.

But oneness is now extended, God, this circle is gonna grow and may the unity and the oneness manifest in this circle be express fulfilled and embodied in the growing sake circle of people who will grow from this moment to be the company of those who follow me. God, and just like you and I are one, may they be one, may they give witness to the fundamental, foundational, communal, relational character I have ordained for my creation. May they model it. Because God, if they can't model it, if they can give us something other than what pervades the fallen reality, how can people really believe that I've come with a salvage message or word? Because it seems like those who follow you just repeat, practice and invest in the same sort of distortion that existed before I came.

God, how can people really believe that you're not a God of the brokenness, that you're not a God of death and destruction, a God of life empowerment and love and that I am the embodied manifestation of your being in the world if the people who say they follow me, follow the dictates and patterns and embrace the frameworks and constructs of the world rather than provide an incarnate manifestation of the fulfillment, of the promise and the possibility.

God, my prayer for them is that they will be so authentic in their communion with me that how they live together will manifest the level of intimacy and integrity in our relationship. And they are one with me, they are one with you as you and I are one. And that people will know who I am and who you are by the way they are and who they are. I pray that they might be one. Let's look for a moment. And I wanna suggest that in the beginning, in the beginning, we see four levels are of oneness in God's creative act and nature that from the unity that God desires.

First of all, there is oneness with God. Notice that the relational symbols are characterized by the word with, God is with us, we were with God and there's the coordinating conjunction 'and.' There's a fundamental connectivity in all creation with the 'and' and the 'with.' There's a fundamental connection with all the rest of creation and with the creatures in creation and without our authentic and true selves. So we see four levels of oneness that are characteristic of the unity that Jesus is praying for. We're on with God. We're in harmony with ourselves. We're not as strange from our own beings. We're not fragmented and alienated from the essence and the goodness of what it means to be human. That humanity is embraced as the manifestation of God's giftedness and God's goodness. And we celebrate the connection in our total beings, body and spirit are connected.

We are whole formed by God in our physical manifestation, breathed upon by God, such that the physical comes to life and the body and the spirit come together and we're whole, and we're naked and not ashamed. In our creation, we're made from mutuality reciprocity that we're connected in this thing. In fact, we are to make clear to us that we are incomplete. We are less than fully efficient in our essence when we operate in isolation. It's not good that you be alone, male and female. And one of the things I suggest the whole idea that then the two shall become one, we have reduced that to only talk about marriage when that may very well be the holistic paradigm for how we walk together. That you and I walk in oneness. And not only do I function in communion with other human beings, such that it's not good for me to be in isolation and in separation I made for relation that relation to extends to all creation.

So there are four levels of unity and oneness that Jesus is really praying us back into, one with God, one with our true selves, one with our neighbor and one with creation. It's easy to understand then how Jesus would say, all of the truth, all of the law hangs on these three things. Love God with all your heart and soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as your loves yourself. And I always add the fourth, you can't love God, love neighbor and love self without a recognizing and honoring how creation is also a manifestation of the character of God. And my relationship with creation is a function of my authentic communion with God.

So we see these four levels. These four levels of oneness. Four levels that invite us to authentic communion with God. Now, this is the design of God. It's the intent of God. This is God's handiwork, and essential and fundamental to the very nature of the handiwork is unity and oneness. And violation and breaking of any of the dimension of the oneness creates an injury or on this day, you will surely die, on this day, what your word there is, you will be separated. You will be pulled apart, and the pulling apart Of God's connectivity leads to death. decline and decay of the human community, of the earth, of our understandings of the possibilities and the possibilities resident and the promise resident in the gift of humanity and the agency of our humanity. And it pulls us apart from the full intimacy and recognition of God. Let me say this right now, oneness like perfection is never possessed, it is always pursued because there is a relational dimension to the oneness, relation can never be a static concept or category where I possess it. I'm always living into this.

That's why my students will always me teach that the greatest way not to ever know God is to know God to well already, such that you think God so well, you've already codified, reified and doctorized God to the degree that God can't get a word edge-wise because you're worshiping what you know about God rather than living as a seeker constantly moving into relationship with God. And that's why this whole issue of forgiveness is fundamental to our unity and our oneness because I recognized in every moment of my existence and in every day of my living, there are moments where in my expression, my fault, my affirmations and in my modalities, I have not fully honored the standard of oneness ordained by God in creation in Christ the holy spirit, and in coming consummation.

Did you hear what I said? We just set the kind of the standard for understanding of oneness. What is the character of the creation? What is the character of the revelation of Christ? What is the function and the nature of the charisma or the work of the holy spirit and what is the goal, vision intent and desire of consummation. So when I examine what oneness is and the standard for assessing my full participation in oneness, does it violate the oneness communicated in creation? Does it violate the oneness incarnated in Jesus Christ? Does it violate the oneness affirmed, birthed and celebrated by Pentecost, by the holy spirit? Does the spirit, does the charisma witness to this oneness that I embrace? And does it manifest the fullness of God's desire for the ultimate fulfillment of all creation and the consummation?

Those are my four principles of looking at oneness this creation, Christ, charisma, and consummation. This sets a standard of how we live into it. And that's why Jesus taught us to pray. He's really praying God, forgive me this day where I have embraced principles and categories of separation. And I have not related function and moved in a manner where I have been an agency of the manifestation and the restoration of the communion and the oneness that you desire in creation. As we begin to assess our time and where we are, let us move further, further by looking at this being one, we see the design. Then we talk about, look at the distortion, the fragmentation and the separation in the word. The distortion is produced by the acceptance of two lies told by the symbol that represents that demonic aspect of a free moral universe, which invites your participation in thought, a desire or behavior in that, which is alien to God's intent, desire and decree for our liar lies together. Look, there's an element that tells two lies that engender the process of fracturing the human community.

First of all, God is above you, is threatened by you and does not want you empowered and fully knowledgeable. God wants you in a deficient state and the God you serve is a God over you which violates the self revelation of God as the God who is with you. Then the other lie is that you are not much. That you don't have intrinsic worth and dignity characterized by your existence in the image of God but in order to have value, you must go outside of yourself and get something outside of yourself, living rather than releasing and living on the amazing gift in the presence of God in yourself. So now you go outside to get something and to getting something makes you somebody. Do we understand family?

That in a very real sense, we're now in a moment where we don't live by affirming and releasing the life and being fruitful participants in life-giving context and the family, we now succumb to a lie and start living and assigning our value and worth by what we get. Now, look at this, and look at how this affects and informs the whole principle of unity and oneness. Let me get up. I'm gonna go to the classroom, if I might and begin to look and begin to think about the two lies. In the beginning, where is God? God is that the center of it all. In the lie then with and coordinated by the end the categories are above and below. You see that family. Now, our consciousness is no longer centered in God where the categories of existence are with and and, we have now established a theological framework where God is above and we are below. Now, look, what happens when you start believing the lie. Lie, you're no good.

And in order to get above, God is here, wants you here and I am now the one who's gonna show you how you can get above too. So therefore, the goal in your life is to get above. And in getting above, you become comfortable with somebody else being below. And getting above, now becomes godly

behavior rather than demonic embrace. Are you with me family? That can you see, look at the shift that's occurring. Relationship is broken. You have now entered into death or separation because the way you are now functioning is above and below rather than with and and. I no go longer and you and me and with you and me, I am no longer with God, with you, with my true self and with a nature, I am above nature. I am divided in my body and I have an above and below dimension, one physical, one spiritual and the church perpetuates this. And then you are no longer the neighbor, you are the threat and we who celebrated each other now war with each other. And you even introduce in your relational modality, in a post-fall existence somebody who is appropriately subject to somebody else. You are introduced in the fall because of your embrace of this to somebody who is above and somebody below.

And now, because of this, somebody has to be subject. Somebody is defined as deficient. So this whole system begins to permeate the reality and it permeates our consciousness to the degree that what is in fact, the deviation from God's design becomes normative for our behavior, even our theology and some of you know, and all of you have been in my class, there's a term I use for this, that we shift from theology to snakeology, and start constructing our world based upon the design of the snake rather than God. Do you understand this? So now we get in to deviation, and the deviation leads to hierarchical valuation where there is a above and a below. And we even begin to construct for world based upon the above and below paradigm. Now, if we could say this for a moment and look at this, so then we get God. And for many people, there's even a hierarchy in the Trinity. Then you get Christ, then you get the holy spirit. And depending on your tradition, then you have something else, something else, something else, something else.

And then you go through these ranks of authority. Then you get the human, and then you start a hierarchical lacing and creating Greek gradations of humanity. In the history of this country, you have male, female, come on, children. And these children are understood as having value based upon their race. Then your culture, then you get what, after that, then you get black men, black women, black children, apes, orangutans, dogs, cats, and you have a hierarchy with a chain of being and you live by trying to move up the chain. And so in the very real sense, you set up a system where somebody else being beneath you gives you a sense of value in your location and you live by moving up rather than living with.

And regrettably, sometimes even in church leadership, I want to move up so that I can be over rather, I am faithful to the degree that I want to be more fully with, that the manifestation and the evidence of our maturation in our faith is our embrace of authenticity and unity. Now, as our time flies, let me just introduce them. How do we get out of this? What is the alteration? Here is a system developed based upon and above and below, based upon in and out, based upon power systems and engendering separation.

Now, let me see and make this very, very clear, in the system, domination is divinized, stratification is sacralized and a hierarchy is spiritualized. Now look, here is the system. It's constructed, it's constructed, and here is the design of God. And we're saying, suggesting that in everyone of God's self disclosive activity, you can see the design, here's the design, the design is relational. The design is integrated. The design is mutual. There is a spirit in the world that introduces a shift away from unity and oneness to separation, hierarchy and devaluation and the establishment of value based upon where you are in the hierarchy in creation rather than your relation in creation. You get separated from your body.

And then even our Western spirituality is in freighted with an anti-semantic body negating syndrome, a Soma phobia which is a correlate of our homophobia that we actually believe the body is something to be repressed and negated. We reduced the value, the dignity and worth and the gift of authentic and humanity. We separate from our bodies and even in the church, the spirit becomes the good part. The body becomes the bad part. And Jesus' question again, is without be made whole, will to bring together because the bottom line is when we are embracing the categories of separation and the

fragmentation of our unity and oneness, we don't bring the body and the spirit back together, we move one domain where the body is superior. And then we go to church and say, no, see the spirit is superior.

But if you look at that, we have not altered the hierarchy. All that we've done is shifted perspectives in the hierarchy so that even after I come to the church I'm just as broken in the church as I was in the world. And the consequence of this is I never experienced the wholeness. I'm at war rather than at peace. So share this now. And so all of these events begin to occur. They begin to shape our consciousness and it's deeply embedded. And we don't wanna get out of a brokenness. We build monuments to our brokenness. We enshrine our brokenness. We caught a fire and established policy to affirm and ensure our brokenness. And we continue to preach a broken theology that affirms a broken community where somebody is always the deficient and I am the superior. And what I look for in truth is not the healing of the brokenness but the maintenance of my privilege and my power in the brokenness. It's often said that once you obtain privilege from oppression, you don't want truth you want a lie which you call true that preserves your privilege. So here's the danger of this separation. And then the separation being the foundation for a hierarchical relation or non-relational. Once I start living like this, then truth is that which preserves my position, my power and my status in the hierarchical system. I even grow you to move up in the system rather than to be agent that is challenging and transforming our systems, such that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. And we often miss this because sometimes in liberation struggles this, guess what, I'm last and now guess what I'm gonna do? No, all you've done is replicated the model that victimized you. The last becoming the first and the first becoming last is not an inversion of the hierarchy, it's the collapsing of the hierarchy to the degree, there is no last or first.

We are a whole people. I don't see you as last and first. I see you as presence and person, and I assign value to you. And anytime I see a system or a structure that denies the intrinsic worth, dignity and value of your person then I have to be an agent of healing and restoration that calls us back to the communion and the unity and the oneness that God desires. And how does God do this? What is the message of God in bringing this to our attention? This is the great gift of Christ. The one who is one with God models oneness in creation and invites us back to oneness with each other. See in the beginning, God presents God's self, boom!

And what do we see? We see God fully manifest in creating communion, unity, harmony, and relationship. Then there is that presence in God's presentation that misrepresents, misrepresents nature of God and creation, through what? Lies. Two lies about God and you, notice this now. You believe the lie and that those living by those lies bring death and destruction to the world. God is still invested in creation, invested to the degree that God is continually constantly giving God's self to restore what God desires in creation. This is the great gift of Jesus, it's God, what? Re-pre-senting God-self. God presented was misrepresented now God represents God's self and Jesus represents God. See? And in representing God, he is no longer the God who is the lie that is over you. Who is he? Emmanuel. Come on! God who is with you. And what is the call of the church? What is the call of the church? That is Jesus represents God. We are called to represent now. And here's my prayer and also my agony, in this nation in clear and ways, the church has not represented God and represented God. It is affirmed, embraced, condoned, and supported the separation.

But thanks be to God, that the stuff of misrepresentation has not stopped God from being manifest in creation. Well, family, let's stop here today. Now that another book today being one, the design, you saw that, the distortion, you saw that and the deliverance, the deliverance in God representing God's self represented and represented in Christ that invites us to represent. On tomorrow, we will consider again, our devotion to this model and our recognition and celebration of diversity as we pursue a different destiny. God bless you.

Session 2

Good morning, family and friends and fellowship of believers who are seeking to fulfill God's design and desire for creation in the human community. We thank the God who again, blesses us with this day and with this moment, and again, we acknowledge our Bishop and our very courageous and creative leadership that He provides to not only the United Methodist church but to this region, this community. And dare I say, even the nation and the world

On yesterday, as we reflect for a moment on where we began, we looked at it being one, the design, the deviation, and the gift of deliverance in Christ Jesus. We enumerated four self regulatory acts of God that reveal God's call to oneness creation, Christ charisma, and consummation. Then we shared for a while about how the whole narrative is regulatory of dimensions that want to distort and create deviation from the design primarily through deception or lies. And the lies are told that caused you to miss the majesty of God and the majesty of your creation. And then as a consequence, you enter into death or state of separation. And the separation is from God, from your true self, from your neighbor and from the rest of creation.

But thanks be to God, I'll be preaching a sermon shortly entitled, The Blessing In The Block. When Jesus, when in the very beginning, God put Adam and Eve out of the garden and put an angel with flaming swords to prevent them from eating that which would give them eternal life. That there was a blessing in the block because that action was not God putting out or putting away, but it was God putting forth in opportunity so that the negatives that had been incurred would not be eternalized, that is the block was actually an act of grace and mercy. That I love you so much, that I will not eternalize your separated condition, in order to overcome separation, I must function in a fashion that does not allow you to perpetually eternalize separation so I block you from that, not to put you really out but to call you forward and make an opportunity for a new heaven and a new earth. And God did that. God did that. And that was in the gift of the deliverance in the deviation. This is the amazing gift of the Christ.

If you will permit me, as you all see I try to do everything I do from memory and what I've internalized with a level of authenticity and spontaneity, that's why I miss you all. I wish we could be in a situation where you could raise your hand, or you could say, now, wait a minute, what about this or that? And we could really in communion communicate where we may have differences or a voice that may help clarify, but we would never embrace the spirit of division. Let me read from my own preparations and writings. To go back to the deviation. So coming to the line, we are distanced from the God who is with us and hide from a God who is beyond us and over us. We are now separated from our true selves and we're ashamed of our bodies that once glorified God. We are now in conflict and competing for place and stuff with those who were once our partners and viewed as gifts from the creator. We now struggle with nature and destroy the garden. We now play power games of coercion, manipulation and control by modeling the over God. We now repress our bodies, compete with neighbor and war with nature. One no longer lives by releasing life but we function by controlling and getting something outside of ourselves rather than being fruitful, relational creatures, we become using, abusing and fruitless. We don't produce fruit, life, we take it. And the story is trying to tell us of a shift from the relational paradigm to a competitive positional paradigm where we don't, and you are valued by what you take not about what you give and produce from your center. We enter into this state of separation embracing before as normal for our understanding of God. We're thrust in a dualistic modality in this condition, God is over and distant from creation while always demanding and coercing and taking something from us.

As creatures, we are insecure, threatened, underlings who try to protect ourselves by being like the distant-taking God and taking something in order to be somebody we move up in place and power in the hierarchy. The giving and the fruitful God, the sacred self are lost in amaze of positions, possessions

and power plays. And the abundant experience of presence and person is missed. We are reduced to monads who relate to the creator and each other for utilitarian purposes. The quality and care of our relationships with each other and the rest of creation are not essential to faithfulness. The other God and the earth are separated.

A lot of demarcation is established between the sacred and the profane and faithfulness is disembodied, immaterial and trans-historical and tragically. Much of the teaching discourse and behavior of the church embraces the hierarchy, the objectification, and the status assigning based upon persons positions in the hierarchy rather than the celebration and encounter of intrinsic worth and dignity.

The church has culpability in this, if I may say this, is even sometimes affirmed as I have written in another context, the culpability in the development and the maintenance of fractured community is further manifest in that some Christians still invite others to join the church to be better than some other person or religion. Some still teach that Christians are better than some other folk. We miss the Christ and the center of Christianity when the church becomes the place we serve a need to be better than. Christianity does not offer an opportunity for someone to be in the highest religion and the goal of our faith is not to get the highest office or to be in the highest religion.

In Christ, we don't live to be above, we live to be with, we live to be authentic and whole. What we suggested on yesterday is that while the powers of deviation can be manifest and expressed in the world and have authority in the world, these powers don't have authority in the body of Christ. That our centering in God is a call and even a compulsion to live in an alternative counter world fashion that we don't participate in agents in the division and the assigning of value purely based upon politics, positions, possessions and whether or not you belong to my group. In this vision, there's a fundamental, profound, and deep recognition of the intrinsic worth and dignity of everybody I encounter particularly in the church but when I understand the full mature consciousness of the character of this God revealed in Jesus Christ, I recognize that no human being on the face of this earth can be viewed without seeing God. Without interpreting with God eyes.

And with those God eyes, I have to begin to invest in behaviors, in thinking, in policies and practices that honors the gift Of God in all humanity. As we consider this and see how Jesus overcomes, if you stop and look at Jesus, everywhere that there is fragmentation, Jesus heals it. Look, the God who was there and you were down here and the tragic consequence of the over God, you then develop that allow you to say that being godly is being over and somebody else down. Think about that for a moment.

And many of us will not surrender the over God because we would have to surrender our over consciousness and constructs where we're always over something and beneath. Jesus said this in 25th chapter Matthew when he said, "What you did under the least of these, you did unto me." And the real challenge that I think it makes to us is not that we affirm ourselves for our charity. The challenge is, why do you treat people like they're the least? When you see them, you never see the least, you see me. And until you see me in everybody, they will be the least and the fact that you're doing something for them makes you the more. When you see them as me, every moment with them is not a moment with the least, it's a moment with me and it's not your claim to fame, it's your recognition of their value in my truth. So in this sense, in the Christ, we see the affirmation. First of all, God is with you. I've been pastoring or a pastor for a long time.

And so I have some pulpit liberties that some of you might not have. I get to go crazy sometimes. So a couple of years ago, I preached a sermon entitled, "Go To Hell." And I talked about the fact that how sometimes we always wanna go to heaven, but it may be that what makes you fit for heaven is your willingness to go to hell. When you can't go to hell for somebody else, you're really not fit for heaven because God entered your hell and went to hell for you when you love that God enough to go to hell. Could we be identified as the church this willing and committed to going to hell. Even if we

don't move and do some things, we locate ourselves in the midst of the hell and we become the life-giving presences. Just, just the thought.

But then one of the things that I pointed out is that too many of us serve a high up God and the sermon that followed that was, I serve a lowdown God. That I serve a lowdown God, my God is so low down that if you make your bed in hell, God will meet you there. What is really saying is that God gives God's self to the situations and where we wanna make God up there, God is the God who is with and God is so low down. He'll meet you, will you make your bed in hell? I'm so glad that I serve a lowdown God, A God who is not up there, but the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who is with me in every situation and circumstance even when I am not committed to the relationship, God is. And Jesus invites us, will you commit? Will you become one as I am with the creator, as I am with you? And can my people be one as I am with the creator? Jesus, first of all, reveals a God who's with us. Then I think what, this is my own approach now, family. So look, that Jesus literally affirms humanity. Jesus came through the precious gift of a woman.

In other words, the way Jesus came into the world was an affirmation of the birth process and affirms God's presence in birth. And could it be, and we're not here to discuss Christology, that his birth is as much about getting God back into humanity as much as the tradition that's been developed that he was born this way to get humanity out of Jesus. Could this be God's profound statement? That I am in humanity. Humanity is the product of my work and my doing. That He restores humanity. The whole birth store restores nature as the stars and the heavens participate in the revelation. It's amazing where all the areas and dimensions of disconnect are transcended both by the narrative.

Just like there's a narrative of befall, there's a new creation narrative where all the dimensions of the fragmentation are transcended by the revelation of God's love and presence in Jesus Christ and now we're invited. Will we be agents of the revelation, of the healing and restoration rather than the brokenness? This is what Jesus does. But here's one of the things that I think that is one of the great tragedies that is now manifest with all of the division that we've had, increasingly, there's a focus on oneness that requires the trivialization and negation of diversity. Oneness and sameness are antithetical. You can't be one when you are the same.

Oneness affirms diversity, oneness affirm that within the amazing aspects of creation you will have diversity in expression and story. The reality is there's nothing wrong with diverse manifestations and interpretations of the Christian story. The problem is not the diversity, the division and as long as life is lived authentically, there will always be diversity. Stop and look at it. No two zebras or tigers had the exact same stripes. No two leopards have the exact same spots. Do you realize I was amazed that they can identify whales by the nature of their flukes. There's some species they can identify by their fins that there is gonna be some diversity in creation. There are those who argue that no two flowers have the exact same color or the exact same scent. There's nothing in creation that is same. No two snowflakes have the exact same design. No two leaves have the exact same vein pattern. None of us had the exact same retinal rod configuration. None of us have the exact same fingerprints or the exact same DNA markers.

In a very real sense, each and every one of us is a unique instance of divine dexterity and God's creative power. So when I see you, I have to see your diversity and your diversity is not a threat to the communion of the oneness. It is the material of oneness. The reality is that in order to have a relationship, there is gonna be diversity in who we are our perspectives but we remain one because our diversity does not allow us to establish deficiency and difference to the degree that it engendered division. Are you with me, family? That is, I'm not you. Tell the story all the time, one of my sons, my wife and I are blessed to have seven children. Six of them are young men. We have three birth children, but we welcome four young men into our family. We don't make distinctions, they're sons, all of that, I got 22 grandchildren that's because all of their children are my children. Anytime they get married with a blended family, they all become mine, great grandchildren. That were family but in this family, there is

such amazing diversity but I got one son who swears he's a lover. I keep teasing him, it's time for him to outgrow that. But he always has a, he has his line and I've shared this often where he I've heard him say to somebody, "Wow, I was just looking at you." And he tries to master a kind of a spiritual language, "You're an outstanding example of feminine pulchritude too that gives ample evidence that I serve a God who does all things well." And he's always talking about you're one in a million, oh, you're one in a million. I said, do you realize how much of an insult that is? Do you realize that she's not one in a million? If you say she's one in a million, there or 300 million people in the United States of America let's just use the figure, that's a dynamic number. And we talk about it, we're 350 million, so guess what? If we divide that evenly, there's 175 million men, 175 million women, I'm just speaking imagistically now, not factually. Then that means that there are 175 persons just like her. So if you don't work out as 174 others know.

When we encounter each other, you encounter a unique instance. In every one of us has the fingerprint of God on us. And I would say, regardless of your race, your religion, regardless of your status, if I affirmed that there is one God, there is one creator, everyone has the fingerprints of God on them. And if I begin to identify them by some other condition or status other than the fact that I see God, I meet you and I meet you, God, I'm missing them.

And if I tutor them to miss the dignity of their God creation then no matter what they see the fingerprints of God on them, and if they can look in the mirror and see something that is not of God, you're not looking at God's imprint, you're looking at smudges left by hands that shouldn't have been on you in the first place. I have these grandchildren and they try to keep Papa, this senior citizen, seasoned citizen. They try to keep me current. So every now and then I have to develop little raps for them to help them understand what I'm saying, to begin to understand the gift of God and the human that Jesus came to affirm. He did not come to affirm your deficiency, he reveals the gift of your humanity and your authenticity and it's this you'll situation and your location and somebody else's interpretation that leads to your negation is not the basis of your identification because your identification is in your creation not your situation, location, their interpretation that leads to your negation.

And once you claim a relation with the source of your creation there is no situation, location, interpretation, or power of negation that can place a limitation on your elevation and your destination, that this route in relation and once I claimed this relationship with God, with self, I live for relationship with you even though I may differ with you radically. I may even have to confront you and engage you. Yes, I will challenge racism, sexism, homophobia. I will challenge any form that diminishes people and objectifies them with a code so that I can't see and affirm how God is in the midst of them. But at the same time, even the person from, I encounter you as a gift of God. There maybe some flaws, there may be this, but I see with the eyes of God. And so in this sense, the diversity does not destroy us. The diversity is the evidence of our God creation. That diversity is the very statement of God that all of this in its diversity is me. And when I meet me. So one of the ways I try to illustrate this, one of the things that amazes me, you all know I'm old school and a lot of ways, I'm conservative as radical as I am on some things, I'm sometimes amazed at the public displays of affection.

I realized when I was in school, you weren't allowed to even a hook up or anything and now I'll go to ball games to support some of the children and stuff for go to events and they hung up anything, all kinds, there were no PDA, no PDA but I can remember dating a young lady and holding her hand. And what amazed me was, I learned the great power in a touch. See our hands would touch and you just didn't hold it, you would all rub into fingers and look into each other's eyes and oh, but as I reflect upon those moment, our hands experienced the empirical, tactile sensation of the encounter but my entire body and being participated in the moment. Our hands were touching but my toes curled up in my shoes. Knees got weak and chills went up and down my spine, helped me to understand ever more fully that the eye doesn't say to the ear and say, you're not an ear or the foot doesn't say to the eye and why? Because I don't want the eye to do the eye thing because there are certain things that the entire

body experiences because of the freedom and authentic expression within the different parts of the body. The foot doesn't say hey hand, don't be a hand be a foot. We're all feet here. We're all this now. The foot says, "Wow, I can't do what you do. And I've never had that experience." But my God, when you share your touch with me, my toes enter the moment. Hallelujah. My back enters the moment. That yes, I don't wanna deny that diversity because the diversity is when we begin to really value the meaning of what it means to be a whole body.

So this is diverse. In this devotion to God, where God is not at the top, but at the center. I remember even moving into ministry. I had a whole preacher says, "Now you got to understand, God is first. Your children and family comes second. Your church comes third." And then he even said, "You come way down here." God does not create a hierarchy of value. And I hope that we will do away with that type of concept and categorization in the way that we even guide people into effective ministry. God is never at the top. God is at the center. And God is at the center of everything I do. God should be the guy and should be ordering your steps in every relationship and the practice.

I'll never forget how this became clear to me as the dean several years ago, as a young man came beating on my door before I was going in to teach my class and my students' know, don't bother Dr. Kenny before class, because as he goes into preparation that's not just about what I've prepared in the lecture but how am I in tune with the spirit in God that I'm the agent of God's presence when I step into the classroom. How do I create sacred space in the learning process, and beating on my door saying, "Dean! Dean! I got to talk to you! I got to talk to you." I said, "Okay, come on, what's wrong?" "I just want you to know, me and my wife we're through, we're through, we're through, we're through. Its over, it's done. She left this weekend and we're done." I said, "Well, come on in, what happened? What happened?" He said, "Dean, she came..." His wife was a way a lot. She had a job that required her to travel but she came home for periods. And he said, "My wife has been away. She was home this weekend and I was working on my stuff. And she said to me, came in and said you know, even when I'm here, you're not." And I said, "Well, how did you respond to her?" "I had to remind her. I took his Bible and said, I had to remind her. God comes first and she comes second."

And I said, "What did she say?" "She said, you and your God go to hell," "Can you? No, no. I don't need a woman like that. I need a woman who support me and work with me in this ministry. God is first in my life." And I said, "Maybe you didn't hear what she said." She said, "You and you go to hell." Because the way you acknowledged her express need was to say to her, the only needs that matter in this house are mine. She came to you saying, I need you. And what you told her is what you need doesn't matter. It's what I need. He said, "What could I said? What'd you expect me to say?" I said, "You could have said to her I hear you and I feel you."

And I know I've been very distracted but God is the center of my life. But sweethearts, since God is the center of my life, you will never have to be second to anything because I want to love you the way God wants you loved." Did you all hear just what I said, God is not here. And then you, with God in your life, you use God as justification for devaluation, neglect and denial of certain groups, certain people, God is at the center. And with God at the center, that center mediates, motivates and directs everything I do. I wanna love my children like God wants them loved. My wife like God wants. I wanna love and function in the church like God wants me to function. So there is no first, second or ranking in my ministry because God is at the center and sets the standard for everything we do. Diversity, the appreciation for all of the dynamic ways in which God has created this. And how do we celebrate, make space, make room, honor and respect the diversity rather than trivialized the diversity by creating a universalization of sameness, which really often is an exercise by the power group to determine what the same will look like and anybody who doesn't fit the same will be excluded, denied repressed and victimized. What does diversity look like? And how do we live in oneness, in the diversity even when some story is not our story?

This is the place that we can begin to hear, understand, engage and embrace the stories diverse as they may be. Well, family, there's so much that we could talk about in this domain of diversity, but we see the deliverance and our devotion to God. Remember now today being one devotion, God at the center and then the devotion celebrates and causes me to recognize within creation, within everything God has done.

One of the marks of God's creation is diversity. Did you ever stop and think why you have diverse gospels? Because each writer, each person who experienced it, came through the axis, the interpretive framework, through the narrative and the story of their experience and the fullness of the truth is not in the negation of a story, but the meeting of the stories and I don't function to destroy the story but to create space where I can hear you, see you and begin to celebrate the marvelous of acts of God in and through you. And together, we are one body. Together, we answer the prayer of Jesus. God, you prayed that would it be one? Well, God, there's a lot of brokenness around us, but in spite of our titles and designations here, we affirm you, you, in all of us. Here, we wrestle how to live with the diversity without devaluing and creating deficiency that requires us to live in division. We are one in you, in Christ, in the holy spirit and have vision for the fulfillment of creation. We are one. We are one. You see, is a way that I try to present this.

Let me get up one minute family, just too often, in the dysfunction and the deviation. Here's how we construct the concept. Let's make this saying, the words in the beginning and the two shall be one. Guess how we just decided, instead of embracing the fundamental and profound spiritual truth, one plus one equals one. So rather than spiritually solving the equation, we worldly and with the conscious of the world solver. Well, if we're gonna be one, somebody's got to be what? A zero. And I don't know if Don P. Zack is listening to me right now. And I'm trying to remember my other dear brothers from my student would teach you and they even showed me a mathematical formula where you could add one and one and get one by using some equations and by relating it to infinity plus infinity equals infinity. Now look, one plus zero. And guess what? That's the way the world functions. That is an order for me to be in relationship, I've got to make you nobody. And you've got to become something that serves me or functions on my behalf. You are an objectified monad who must conform to my definition of your being and the purpose of the definition is for you to serve my understanding and my person and for you to askew any authenticity.

Now, historically in male-female relationships, a good zero was what? A woman, but you got a female Bishop. And there are a lot of folk right now. I'm gonna just say it. Okay? Can I just say it? There are a lot of folk right now who would still have problems with female leadership. And it was made absolutely clear recently in our history in a number of different ways. So we say, when I relate to you, I immediately begin tutoring you in how to be a zero. And then the minute that you start claiming yourself, the language becomes you're getting out of your place because your place is beneath me that requires the negation of your being. Now, other folks do this, one half plus one half equals one. Now, we don't wanna be zero, we'll both be half of this relationship, but guess what? In spiritual language, this is a broken person with a broken person will always lead not to one but a broken relationship. And premarital counseling, I talk about, if you are a miserable by yourself, you're gonna be miserable with somebody else. And don't relate to fix your brokenness, you relate to share your wholeness. So this is a whole person plus a whole person equals a whole relationship.

So when I meet you, not just in marriage, I encounter a whole person that does not mean you don't have flaws, it does not mean that you don't participate in brokenness but I embrace your identity as an invitation for you to be whole, to be affirmed as a human being who has intrinsic worth and dignity that I encounter that dignity before I encounter any exterior about you and I affirm that dignity. So therefore, I see you. I wanna share with you, this is something that I'm gonna share. Starting in June, when we greet each other as a church, we will say saw sawubona. Sawubona is a term that comes from the Zulu in South Africa which means we see you. We see you. Now, let me just share with you what will

be on the webpage. Sawubona with is a greeting from the Zulu in the Motherland, which means we see you, I see you. This is not just a polite hello but rather an act of recognizing your worth and dignity of each person we encounter. It says, I see the depth and the whole of you, including your past, your mystery, your flow, your flaws, the gift of your presence and the promise of your future. The greeting indicates that I affirm your being and value your life.

Sawubona symbolizes our authentic presence with each other and our willingness to invest in each other and the wellbeing of our community. We exist together and I see you. I pay attention to you. I believe the best for you. And I offer myself for the realization of the best that we can be. Sawubona calls us beyond seeing the stuff to seeing the soul and moves us beyond labeling and defining by the exteriors to valuing the life, perceiving beyond the blindness of hierarchical categories of supremacy and self and other negation, we step out of the darkness of division into the light of truth that allows us to see each other more deeply and clearly, and commit to being the church, the people of God and the agents have a new heaven and a new earth. So as I prepare to conclude the day, in my moment of sharing with you, sawubona, I see you. We see you. At some point, I don't see your politic, I don't see the stuff about you. We are one because we see each other. And when you come here, can I say this? When you come to the Virginia Annual Conference, you don't experience a label that has already defined you as deficient, unwanted and undesirable. I see you. I see you is created by a God who has made you mystically, wonderfully mysteriously and even magically. I see you in all of the giftedness of God in you. So before you hear anything about my policy, my position, or my politics, here this, God loves you. And I do too. Sawubona.

Our time won't permit it but can I just throw this out family? If we're ultimately gonna think about being one, it's going to require us to find a new symbol system for talking about God's fulfillment, the kingdom, the reign of God, because the more I come to look through the eyes of the God who sees me and to love myself, my neighbor and God and creation, the more I recognize I can't have a future that glorifies and eternalize separation and division.

If God created us for unity, calls us to oneness, then how can the God, when that God comes to absolute reign, be the God who makes division eternal. God, my God at the center. May we be one. Sawubona. We see you. I see you. We see you. I see you. And with every prophetic, radical stance that we take against anything and I've articulated multiple times where I stand on the number of things that divide us in this land, mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. May they be one. Sawubona. Sawubona. We see you.