

**Unity in Community**  
(John 15:1-8 and 1 Corinthians 1:10-19)

Jenny Thompson is one of the most decorated American women when it comes to Olympic competition. Her ten Olympic medals in swimming in three Olympics also mean that she has won more medals in swimming than any other Olympic athlete of any nation with the possible exception of Michael Phelps. Eight of those ten medals were gold. However, none of her gold medals were won in individual events. She won her gold medals in team events with three other swimmers.

Some people have questioned whether Jenny's swimming accomplishments should rank her with the "great" Olympic champions. She asks the question herself. The 27-year-old swimmer from Dove, New Hampshire, said: "It's got to be very different to experience an individual gold versus team gold." And ice-skating champion Bonnie Blair said recently of Jenny, "I wish she could feel what it's like to win an individual gold, to witness it by herself and not just as part of a team."

But Jenny's accomplishments should be refreshing to us. In the ego-driven U.S. culture where individual accomplishment is often rewarded with multi-million dollar sports contracts, Jenny's accomplishments are indeed refreshing. With professional athletes moving from team to team and demonstrating little loyalty, Jenny is a marvelous example of a person whose genuine success came in the context of team play – or community.

This is how the church should work, as well. Our true "stardom" occurs when we participate as part of a winning team. On God's team, there's no room for superstars or mega-celebrities who do it all on their own.<sup>1</sup> Please pray with me.

Uniting God, bring us together as one community this morning – as a part of the one true vine – the body of Christ. Help us to understand that we cannot bear fruit by ourselves. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed so that we might bear fruit for you – the grower of the vine. This we pray in the name of Christ Jesus – the true vine to which we are forever attached. Amen.

The reading from the gospel of John this morning should be familiar to most of us. Framed in an agricultural setting, the message of the Parable of the Vine is quite clear. The only way we can be fruitful is by being a part of the vine. Jesus said:

<sup>1</sup>I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower. <sup>2</sup>If any of my branches doesn't bear fruit, he breaks it off; and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, that it

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Mutchler, Ferndale, Washington, from Associated Press reports (September 2000)

may bear even more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You are already made clean by the word I have spoken to you; <sup>4</sup> live in me as I live in you. The branch cannot bear fruit by itself but has to remain part of the vine; so neither can you if you don't remain in me. [John15:1-4 *NIV*]

Jesus uses the metaphor of the vine to create a biblical image. The vine represents the people of Israel, planted from selected stock, cared for by God. And what mattered to Israel was the collective conduct of the community as one body. The concept of individuality was foreign to the first century Mediterranean culture. What mattered most was the community – Israel – not the individual.

Now the true Vine has taken root. Christ is the trunk from which the branches sprout. The branches are all who live by his model. But Jesus is also the entire plant, trunk and branches together. The parable quickly emerges as a metaphor for Christian community. As Christians, attached to the one true vine, we are the body of Christ.

But Jesus is not saying that the Christian community is the vine. He says, "I am the vine." So each one of us must consider how we are joined with Jesus through faith, prayer, and obedience. Each one of us has to bear fruit so that the community is fruitful. Our fruitfulness comes through being in community; fruit that comes through participating in the body of Christ.

Jesus doesn't tell us just what these fruits should be. Our fruit can be service, understanding, working for social justice, or even a life silently offered to God. But Jesus does insist that these fruits come from the Spirit and bear his seal. That is to say, our

fruits must be produced in the name of Christ Jesus thereby adding to the body of Christ.

The success of the Church then is not measured by individual achievements, but by the faithful progress of those members of the body who interiorize Christ's mystery and share in his sacrificial ministry.

When I was a little boy one of my earliest childhood heroes was Davy Crockett. Do you all remember Davy Crockett – king of the wild frontier? He was immortalized in books, on early television and films. There was even a popular song about his heroic feats. He was known as the guy with the coonskin hat who allegedly killed a bear at the age of three.

Another cultural icon of my childhood was the Lone Ranger. He wore a white cowboy hat and a black mask to protect his identity. He traveled around the west also doing heroic deeds with his Indian sidekick, Tonto.

Characters like Davy Crockett and the Lone Ranger were icons because they reflected the American culture that has always been defined by our pioneer spirit. In the seventeen hundreds, as the colonists moved out from the east coast they took this spirit with them. It's this pioneering spirit that built the United States of America.

As our culture has evolved we have become a society of individuals. The story about Jenny Thompson, the Olympic swimmer, underscores the perceived importance of individualism in our culture. The ego-centered individualistic nature of our culture today can be seen in virtually every element of society – from sports, to entertainment, to corporate America, even in the church. The culture of rugged individualism has served our nation well

for more than two hundred years. But there are inherent dangers associated with individualism.

When I officiate at wedding ceremonies I always include in my message to the couple a warning about the individualism. I affirm that maintaining their individuality is important to their growth as human beings. At the same time, however, I caution the couple that individuality has the power to be destructive by distancing them from the love that is uniting.

In making the decision to marry, the couple is effectively saying that it is not good for them to live alone. Unity in marriage then must transcend the importance of the individual. Unity in marriage means putting the self last and your companion first. This was fundamental to the teaching of Jesus in the first century. And it's no less the truth for us today.

Unity in the church must also transcend the importance of the individual. The early church understood this well. At first, when resources were scarce, they sold their possessions and pooled all that they had for the good of the community. And in our New Testament reading this morning, Paul instructs the church at Corinth about the dangers of division within the church. The Corinthian church was being split apart by individual leaders who could not agree with one another and cultivated followers who thought like they did.

Being your own individual is important to your growth as a human being. You need to be in touch with your inner self – that which makes you who you are. But the individual within must always give way to unity. There

must be unity in community – unity in the body of Christ.

It is our desire – our passion – to be the church for the world. So it must also be our desire – our passion – to put the individual last and community first. We can't be the church for the world if we are not first united in Christ.

In order to begin uniting the church, the districts in the Northern Illinois Conference have been aligned into clusters. Our church is a part of the Du Page Cluster along with seven of our neighboring United Methodist Churches from Winfield, Carol Stream, Wheaton and Glen Ellyn.

The purpose of the cluster alignment is to come together in community to find new and innovative ways we can cooperate with each other in ministry. The emphasis of this "team" approach is unity in community and, like the Parable of the Vine, to be fruit-producing Christians.

Through our cluster, we hope to take advantage of each church's strengths to enhance our ministries and outreach to the surrounding communities. Rather than compete with one another we will share resources where it makes sense to save money or be more effective in our ministries. You will hear more about the team approach to ministry in the future as the bishop gathers each cluster and meets with us as individual churches as well as a cluster.

In the Parable of the Vine, there is another concept that applies to unity in community that we should not overlook. Sometimes, in order to produce abundant and quality fruit we need to be pruned back. Being pruned back may mean that some of us may be called to fill roles we are uncomfortable with. It may also mean – from time to

time – that we will be called to simply step back and let someone else fill a role.

Being part of the true vine requires that we let go of our individualistic culture and put our ego aside. Being part of the true vine sometimes requires doing things we might not otherwise choose to do. Being part of the true vine means being more like Jenny Thompson, the winner of eight gold Olympic medals – all in team events. While she may never know the feeling of winning an individual gold medal, she knows well the feeling of unity in community.

As we learn more about our cluster we need to remember the Parable of the Vine. We need to let our culture of individualism dissolve into community and become one in the body of Christ. We need to embrace unity in community and share our God-given gifts with that community. To this end, I encourage you – even challenge you – to look for ways to enter into cooperative ministry here in our own church as well as with other churches in our cluster. Some of you have already come to me with some great ideas. Through cooperative ministry we can each discover just how we are connected to the true vine. We can discover who we are as Christians serving together in the body of Christ. We can find unity in community!