

*“The Catholic Spirit”*

*John 10:11-18*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*August 19, 2012*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

This morning I want to talk about one verse from today’s reading. John 10:16 says *“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”*

I still remember the Ash Wednesday 30 years ago when I was a young pastor in Queens, New York. I was in the sanctuary finishing preparations before the evening service when a young man walked in. Asking if I could help, he inquired as to whether there would be a Mass that evening. When I assured him there would be, he wanted to know if there would be ashes given on the forehead as part of the service. At that time, long before the liturgical changes that our denomination has embraced, most Methodist churches did not give ashes, so I answered “no.” I can still recall his response: *“Why are there so many things that divide us? God wants us to be together, right?”*

His question is as valid today. *“God wants us to be together, right?”* Our disunity is a disgrace. Our disunity as a world community fuels the animosities that burst into war. Our disunity as Christians mocks our self-understanding as the Body of Christ.

What kind of unity are we talking about? Considering today’s Gospel, most of us probably didn’t grow up with the pastoral images of sheep and shepherd it employs. I didn’t so needed to do some homework. I found that a “flock” is a group of mammals and a “fold” is an enclosure for containing or structuring animals. So it is significant that Jesus said there shall be one flock and one shepherd, but not one fold.

There does not, therefore, need to be one structure in which we are contained. The diverse Christian denominations and varied

ways of worship are not necessarily in contradiction to Jesus' statement. But there does need to be a sense of our common unity as children of God, as Christians and, locally and specifically, members and friends of Mary Taylor Memorial Church. Our disunity is not going to be solved by one world or church government, but by claiming that all the different folds belong equally to the Lord of the Universe.

United Methodists are sometimes accused of being theologically flabby. Although we recognize all the major and historic creeds, we don't require everyone to affirm a single statement of faith. But we do have doctrines that are unique to United Methodists and that we value as important.

One of these is called "the Catholic spirit." It comes from John Wesley's sermon No. 39 of the same title, a title I have borrowed. Mr. Wesley's sermon was based on II Kings 10:15 which, paraphrased, says "*If your heart is with my heart then give me your hand.*" Mr. Wesley said that the people called Methodist should practice living in that spirit. The word "catholic" does not refer to "Roman Catholic." It means "universal" as in the Creed when we say "I believe in the holy catholic (universal) Church."

How does this work out? How do we handle genuine disagreements? Mr. Wesley answers famously with a rhetorical question: "*Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?*" This question is grounded in the deepest essentials of our faith. You remember Jesus' reply when asked which of 613 commandments in *his* scripture, the Hebrew Bible, were the greatest. He replied with two: Deuteronomy 6:5 "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*" and Leviticus 19:18 "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" Love, our willed concern for the well-being of another, takes precedence. In terms of our interactions we are to be "*speaking the truth in love*" according to Christian scripture in Ephesians 4:15.

As to its practical application, Mr. Wesley also encouraged us in the same spirit in his sermon No. 91 entitled “On Charity:” *“in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity,”* “charity” being the old English word for self-giving, neighbor-serving love.

As I told the young man that Ash Wednesday night long ago, wherever there are people, there will be differences. That’s part of God’s creative genius, I believe, to grace us with the gifts of different accents, different colors, different needs, different perceptions on what it is to be fully human. Part of how we develop an identity is not only to understand who we are. *“Know thyself,”* an exhortation sometimes attributed to Socrates but actually far more ancient, is always wise. Part of knowing ourselves also means knowing who we are not. Knowing that I am a white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, American Protestant tells me that I am different from people of other ethnic backgrounds, female, gay, Catholic, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu from other nations. The choice for us always is whether we will use that awareness of “self” and “other” to divide, to denigrate, to dismiss and to destroy; or whether we will use that awareness to embrace, engage, enrich and enable God’s marvelous plan for us.

*“So there shall be one flock, one shepherd”* said our Savior; and again: *“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”* (Matt. 18:20). The application—in how we think, act, and treat one another and the world around us—is in our hands. When we join hands at the end of service today, may the catholic spirit be the tie that binds. Amen.