

Together, With One Voice
Romans 15:1-6 (4-6)
by David Bartlett

Sometimes praising God together with one voice doesn't look exactly the way we thought it would.

Sunday after Sunday at the worship of the Congregational Church of New Canaan, Connecticut—as in many churches—the congregation joins together in a shared prayer of thanksgiving. In the third pew just to the left sits Janet Roberts. She will turn one hundred next week, and she does not see very well or hear very well. Like many of us who do not hear very well, she sometimes speaks rather loudly; like many of us who do not see very well, she usually reads rather slowly. So, however slowly and deliberately the congregation says the words of the unison prayer, Janet is always slower and more deliberate still.

Week after week communal prayer ends something like this:

Minister and almost all the people: “Therefore with grateful hearts we come again into your presence, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

And then everyone sits absolutely still while Janet says alone and aloud: “Therefore with grateful hearts we come again into your presence through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Then everyone says: “Amen.”

Paul writes to the Romans: “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another...so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Is that it? Is that odd mix of silence and solidarity, the speaking and the waiting, the deference and the confidence, is that one voice? It is just that; a vision for the church and a vision for this school on this joyous occasion.

Here's how I think the church can glorify God with one voice; here's how I think that Columbia Theological Seminary can glorify God with one voice.

Paul himself gives us the first clue. “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scripture we might have hope.”

Of course what Paul means by “scripture” is what we call the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament, depending on the day and the audience. Little did he dream that one day we would think that these very words that he is writing would be “scripture” too. But the principle holds.

When he wants to show forth the shape of God’s future he looks to the stories of God’s past; when he wants to encourage hope he relies on memory.

What seems counterintuitive and countercultural to everybody around us is the center of our lives; we live at the intersection of memory and hope. We look back only in order to look ahead.

Think of this occasion itself. It is in every way a time of hope, but when President Hayner decided how to call us to hope he did what Christians always do. He asked for an interpretation of the old text. He called us to consider words that were written in former days for our instruction, knowing that through those old words the ever new God who gives us steadfastness and encouragement, the ever new God will entice us toward hope.

That is why the church and this seminary are unashamedly and irrevocably wedded to the task of interpreting and applying scripture. In every class, in many conversations, whenever we gather to worship: there they are, those words written of old for our instruction and our encouragement.

For five years now this seminary has been committing a major act of publication. Two of our faculty obsessively, eight of us exhaustingly, and every one of us faithfully has been contributing to a lectionary guide called *Feasting on the Word* [Dr. Bartlett, along with adjunct professor Barbara Brown Taylor, is the editor of *Feasting on the Word*].

The title *Feasting on the Word* captures what we are about here. Not, as in some schools “gazing skeptically at the word, if it really is the word” or as at some other schools “Beating each other over the head with the Word.” No, God’s word in holy scripture: Feast, Nurture and Delight.

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scripture we might have hope.”

So that is one clue to the way we live faithfully as the church as the seminary. We live under the guidance of scripture.

But Paul also gives us the other clue. According to the NRSV Paul says: “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one

another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It's that “together with one voice” phrase that is tricky, a fact that I discovered only after I had sent it in as the title for this sermon. A fact that I suspected when I waited for Janet Roberts to finish her contribution to the communal prayer at New Canaan Congregational.

So now watch me backpedal a bit.

“Together” cannot simply mean “in unison” as if worship consisted in everybody always saying the same thing at the same time. If “Together” meant “in unison” then Janet Roberts wouldn't be praying “together” with her fellow Christians in New Canaan each Sunday, and I can assure you that she is.

“Never refer to the Greek text in a sermon,” I tell my students; “just humbly think about the Greek to yourself.” Ah, well, so much for that rule. The Greek term that the NRSV translates “together” is better translated “with one purpose.” Paul tells us to glorify God, not necessarily all at once, but with one purpose.

And what about that “with one voice” phrase. Paul cannot possibly mean that we praise God on one note. The saintly choir in heaven and on earth, in congregation and seminary must be more mixed than that. When the Romans hear these verses they are about seven minutes from having heard Paul remind them that they are the Body of Christ and they do NOT all have the same gifts. Certainly that means that we do not all sing or praise or think or pray on exactly the same pitch. And just three and a half seconds ago the Romans heard Paul tell them to “live in harmony” not to “live in uniformity.”

That's what this vision is about, I think; that we should sing with one purpose and that we should sing harmoniously, not that we should always sing in unison and certainly not that we should all become monotones for the sake of the Kingdom.

We do not know what will happen to our churches in the decades ahead. Sometimes we're afraid that we are moving quickly from mainline to old line to flat-line. Beep beep beep beep . . . bee-ee-eep.

Here's what we know. God will be God; Christ will be Lord, and the church will be church. Those of us who love the old ways may need to learn to sing a new song or two in a strange land. And we'll be singing in a bigger choir than we used to think.

But the God of steadfastness and encouragement will give us hope. The Bible tells us so.

And also a word about this school, as we inaugurate an old friend who is a new president.

We, Columbia Theological Seminary, we are not, we have not been, we will not be a multitude of monotones singing—monotonously—in unison. We are more like a theme and variations. The theological theme is the sovereign God revealed in Jesus Christ and witnessed by the Word. The vocational theme is and is to be preparation for the ministry of word and sacrament in the churches and especially in the Presbyterian Church, USA. Thanks be to God.

But we rejoice in the variations. In the recent student body we've had a Baptist student preparing to minister to children of incarcerated parents to provide them comfort, guidance and hope; two Korean Presbyterian students preparing to do graduate study in order to for teach homiletics to a new generation of their fellow Koreans and Korean Americans; a graduate devoting her life to ministering to people with AIDS and their families, through the word of comfort and the sacrament of justice. And on and on and on.

And our faculty: solidly Presbyterian, wonderfully decent and usually in order. But the two colleagues about to move on from our faculty—the two family members we are girding ourselves to miss are a Disciples of Christ man [Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi] on his way to Southern Methodist University. and a Roman Catholic woman [Kathleen O'Connor, who is retiring and is], fortunately on her way only as far as Kirk Road.

We install a president who brings his own gifts, history and hopes, who will not sing in exactly the same register as anybody else, who will teach us and learn from us and join us in raising harmonious—well, usually harmonious—voices to the glory of God.

A few years ago the theologian George Lindbeck retired after a rich and fruitful career as teacher and scholar. At his retirement party Professor Lindbeck was asked to say a few words. He said that the week before he had been ill and happened to turn on the radio to pass the time. To his delight he found the annual Christmas concert by the Saint Olaf College Choir.

During intermission the announcer had asked one of the students what she appreciated about being a member of the choir. She said: “When I perform with the

choir I realize that I am joining in music that began long before I got here, and that will continue long after I have gone.”

Lindbeck said: “That is what it has meant for me to do Christian theology. I became part of a music that was sung long before I got here and will continue long after I am gone.”

So do we, all of us, now with a new conductor, join in Columbia’s song, which is the church’s song as well—long before we got here; long after we have gone.

With one purpose; in steadfast harmony; through Jesus Christ, singing Glory, glory, to our God. Amen.

David Bartlett is professor of New Testament at Columbia. He preached this sermon at a worship service on April 12, 2010, the evening before Steve Hayner’s inauguration as the seminary’s ninth president.
