



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
October 7, 2018 Sermon

We Would Be One: God's Guest List

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 25:6-9, Matthew 11:28-30

After four years, it's time for me to come clean. Of course, I didn't tell the search committee this, although they may have suspected; perhaps some of you may have guessed it already. But yes, today, I'll admit it: it's true: I am prone to alternating fits of ontological monism and ontological pluralism.

No, it's not a medical condition. Actually, ontological monism is actually a philosophical position holding that existence, reality, being itself (that's the "ontological" part)—ultimately, truly—is unchanging, singular, unitary, and one (that's the "monist" part). It's opposed to ontological pluralism, which holds that (yes, you guessed it) existence, reality, being itself—ultimately, truly—is changing, plural, diverse, and many.

This question goes way, way back. Some 2500 years ago, the philosopher Parmenides said: "Reality is one: uncreated and imperishable, for it is whole, complete and unchanging. It was not—nor shall it be—different, since it is now, all at once, one." That's ontological monism with a vengeance.

At about the same time, another philosopher named Heraclitus, said the exact opposite: Reality is many: . "Everything is changing, becoming," he said, "everything is in flux"; and (most famously), "You can't step into the same river twice, it's not the same river; you're not the same person." At least on one reading (even in his own day, Heraclitus was known as "the obscure"), this seems to say that because everything is always changing, reality is endlessly and ongoingly plural. That's ontological pluralism with a vengeance.

Now, I'm guessing that, about now, all of this may seem more than a little obscure to you: both historically distant and hopelessly abstract.

But bear with me: I mean to tell you that a better understanding of this question will make us better people, individually and collectively—and it will help us to understand the significance of this table [gesture], and the Lord's Supper we are about to celebrate today. I know, I know, you're skeptical: but bear with me. Here's the problem: both the monist and the pluralist are right, but neither can acknowledge the other's truth.

Think of it this way: Are you one or are you many?

Well in one sense, you're clearly one: you've been you your whole life. But in another sense, you're clearly many: you've changed and continue to change—you've been changing your whole life and will no doubt continue to do so.

Think of it first in physical terms. At this moment, your body has many different parts—it is many. But it is also one—it is singularly your body. And this is even more true about our bodies over time: they are always changing: the body I have now is most decidedly not the body I had 30 years ago (sigh). And yet it is still singularly, uniquely mine—as was that body of 30 years ago. Physically, we are both one and many.

The same is true of our minds: at any given moment, we hold many and various thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and dispositions. And yet there is, nonetheless, one mind holding them. And this is even more evident over time: the things I think and believe now are not the same as those I thought and believed 30 years ago (thank God). And yet it is still one me, then, now, and connecting the “then” and “now.” Mentally, we are both one and many.

The one and the many are also played out in human speech. Whether you count a word, or a sentence or a paragraph, the speech, the essay, or the book, as the one singular unit, it still has many parts—it is both one and many. This sermon, for example, has many parts (words, sentences, paragraphs), but it still has a singular meaning, or please God, would have one.

And of course we can see both the one and the many in all human associations, including in our political life—the Latin phrase enshrined on the Great Seal of the United States: “e pluribus unum,” it’s even on our money. Meaning: “From many comes one.”

Our problem —and really, it’s not just my problem—is that we’re all prone to alternating fits of ontological monism (reality is one) and ontological pluralism (reality is many).

Either we take one certain difference, and presume that it defines all reality (for example, per my mother, my grandfather implicitly held that heaven was like the Union League of Philadelphia—all white, male, and Republican). Or we take all differences as ultimate and ultimately defining, and proclaim that there is only endless ongoing differences defining and dividing us (an ideology becoming more and more pronounced in our public life).

What we can’t seem to get into our heads—or into our hearts for that matter—is that reality can be—in truth, is—both one and many. You’d think we’d know this since it’s all around us, written into the fabric of the universe. Even the word “universe” says it: at its root it means “all changes (verses) combined into one” (uni)). And even more than that, it’s written into the fabric of our bodies, minds, and speech. You’d think we’d get this. Yet we can’t seem to see it. Sometimes we insist that reality is exclusively one—namely, exactly the way “our side” sees it. But then, soon enough, we turn around and insist that our differences are ultimate, define us, and that there is nothing to unite us. You can see this played out in our current politics: alternating fits of ontological monism and ontological pluralism—and not e pluribus unum—seem to be the order—or rather, the disorder—of the day.

Notice, however, that this is our problem, not God’s. Go back to Isaiah 25:

“The Lord of hosts will make for all peoples, a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines . . .”

God—who is one, will host a great feast for many—for all—peoples. The one and the many

Jesus offers the same invitation:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

That’s Jesus the one calling us, the many, all of us—for who doesn’t, at least on occasion, feel weary and burdened?

And in both of these invitations, our differences are honored and not obliterated. The only thing to be obliterated is what would forever divide us from God, from one another, from everything. Again listen to Isaiah 25:

“The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.
God will swallow up death forever.”

Even when he’s looking his own death squarely in the face, Jesus makes the same promise. He says:

“And when I am lifted up from the earth [he means both his crucifixion and his resurrection], I will draw all people to myself.”

“I will draw all people to myself”: that’s what this table signifies, and that’s what we celebrate on World Communion Sunday.

People, so many, many people, will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God. And at this table, we can see that we are both one and many, and that this unity honors and fulfills our differences. At this table we can see most clearly that we are both one and many in God.

When he broke the bread, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him—the One.

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Friends, take heart, in Jesus Christ, we would be—we will be—we are—one.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

