

The Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year C  
June 2, 2019  
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*Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that 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. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*

*"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:20-26)*

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Today's reading from the Gospel of John is, once again, about love. Not only that, but what it means to be united in love, to be one. This passage comes at the end of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples, his last will and testament, so to speak;

And he concludes it with this prayer to God on behalf of his disciples, and all who will follow them – that they will be one as Jesus and God are one.

Clearly it is important to Jesus that we love one another, and that we are united and at peace with each other. "Be one," Jesus says.

I wonder, however, what Jesus really meant by this. Because never has there been a time before or after Jesus walked the earth that people have been "at one" with each other...it just doesn't come naturally to us. In fact, when I was a mother raising my sons through their "terrible twos," I found myself marveling at the fact that the human race has survived this long! And it doesn't stop when we're two!

When Jesus commanded his disciples, and us, to be united in our love for each other he has to have known just how difficult that can be, sometimes. How do you love someone who commits senseless and incomprehensible acts of violence like what we witnessed Friday? And it's not just individuals whose actions are reprehensible...I am sure we all can think of some people in our lives, our community, our work...in our own family, who are just impossible to love. People who annoy us, who are rude or selfish, people who are relentlessly demanding...or whose ideas about things are simply too far out to tolerate. Sometimes you just have to say: "God loves you and I'm doing the best I can".

But what makes all of this so hard to do, all this loving of people who annoy us, is the concept of love we get stuck with, the “warm fuzzy” kind of love. I talked about this a few weeks ago, when we read in the Gospel of John Jesus’ command to “Love one another, as I have loved you.” For Jesus, being united in love isn’t so much a feeling, but a choice - to *act* for the good of another – for *their* benefit, *their* spiritual growth, *their* relationship with God – not necessarily for how it makes us feel, or to our own satisfaction.

And Jesus knows, this kind of love isn’t easy, and it’s certainly not something we can do on our own. He reminds us over and over again that we love this way because God first loved us. We are united because Jesus is within us and God is in Jesus - God abides in us and we abide in God. As we say at the end of my yoga class: it is the God in me that bows to the God in you.

But it doesn’t just stop with you and me...with us. In our reading for today, Jesus prays for his followers to be united with each other in order for *the world* – out there - to know the love of God. In other words, Jesus prays for our unity, not simply for its own sake, but for the sake of witnessing God’s love to the world around us.

And that is where things get a bit tricky. Because we all know that the followers of Jesus had a lot of trouble “being one” – and we still do!

John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople in the late fourth century, argued that the world could only come to faith in Jesus by observing the transformed lives of the followers of Jesus. He wrote, “And how will they believe? He then paraphrases the passage we get today, with Jesus praying to God: “You are a God of peace. And if therefore my disciples keep the same peace they have learned from me, their hearers will know the teacher by the disciples, however, if they quarrel, people will deny that they are the disciples of a God of peace and will not allow that I not being peaceable, have been sent from you!”

John Chrysostom was no stranger to church fights and spoke with the voice of experience. He knew what it looked like to outsiders when the insiders couldn’t get their act together...how ridiculous it was to witness to a God of love and peace while those very witnesses couldn’t keep the peace among themselves.

You’ve all heard talk about the “mission of the church.” Oftentimes, when we hear that phrase, we think about our outreach ministries, whether close by or abroad. But in today’s passage from John, Jesus seems to be saying that a primary “mission” of the church is to actually just be a loving and peaceful community in the midst of a broken and divided world.

And so, what I ask is this. What *does* that unity, that oneness look like for the greater church when we are so different, when we hold so many diverse theologies and have so many different ways of worshiping? Do we “keep the peace” by holing up in our safe corners with people who see things as we do, speak our language, follow the God we have made in our own image? Does oneness have to mean holding the same political views and moral values? Does it mean saying the same prayers, using the same liturgies, reciting the same doctrines? Or is there a deeper unity grounded in the love of God - that transcends all differences? Or better, can we see our

differences as invitations to lean in and encounter the God who we did not make up – the God who is found in the image of others?

As far as I know, there is nowhere in Scripture that Jesus called for doctrinal unity, organizational unity, or political unity. And yet, so often, his prayer for us, “that we may all be one” has been mis-used to justify particular interests and agendas, even the harsh imposition of artificial unity. But Jesus’ prayer is for a unity that flows out of the love of God, received and shared among his followers, one that shows “the world,” the peace of Christ, born out of patience and tolerance, forgiveness and compassion.

That is, when we Christians “get along” with one another, our unity gives the world a chance to catch a glimpse of our “peaceable” teacher, Jesus. When we Episcopalians partner with Methodists, or the United Church of Christ, or Roman Catholics, or Baptists, like we do in programs like CARITAS, or partnerships like Re:Work Richmond and Circles RVA, we offer a model to our communities, of a better world, a healed human family. I believe that these small acts of unity among Christians do offer us and those who look at us from the outside a new hope for the eventual unity and reconciliation of all people.

This is what the ecumenical movement that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had in mind when they chose Jesus’ prayer that “we all be one” as the cornerstone of their efforts. Since then, many of us, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and the Moravian church, Presbyterians and Methodists, are now in formal communion with one another while retaining our unique identities. These have been good and productive developments, but of course, they haven’t been easy...and we certainly haven’t shaken all the bugs out yet!

I thought of this earlier this week, as clergy from a variety of denominations joined us for the Celebration of our New Ministry. The Lutheran Pastor who I worked alongside for 5 years was there, Lou Florio. Some of you know that my former congregation, All Souls, worshiped at Messiah Lutheran Church. Their front lawn boldly displayed both our their sign and ours. Each Sunday, we rotated through the narthex, sanctuary, classrooms, the fellowship hall. And...we had had to be patient with one another as we juggled a tight worship schedule, shared a sacristy, changed the way we set the altar and chose liturgical hangings.

This required compromise, open-mindedness, and self-giving; the kind of love that costs us our preconceptions and tightly held convictions, even some of our most cherished traditions. Or to put it more bluntly, the things that can become our idols.

So how is it that we, here at St. John’s show the world what it means to be united in love with people who do not worship the way we do or believe the things we like to believe? How can we really be that “Beacon on the hill”, shining God’s love so brightly? I am not sure I know, exactly, but what I do know is that love begins and ends in relationships. We can talk about the nature of love all we want, but until we see it made visible in the way we relate to one another, we really don’t “do” love at all.

Perhaps, this week, we might all consider how each one of our relationships is significant, how each might have Godly, eternal significance. And then, what changes or adjustments might happen in our lives if we really believed our highest calling was to tend to those relationships, including the difficult ones? What would this kind of love look like, not only in relation to our families and closest friends, but with the people who call themselves Christian, even though their thinking or lifestyle or evangelism or truth claims might be really, really different from our own?

Our unity hinges on this kind of love. It all begins and it all ends, in love.

Amen