

Easter 7, Year C
May 16, 2010
John 17:20-26
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The audience for today's passage from St. John's gospel is God, but the subject is us, we who are here today gathered. For in this passage Jesus prays not only for his disciples, but also "on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word," and that is every subsequent generation of Christians. The purpose of this prayer is that "they all may 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." Most simply put, the prayer is for the sort of unity that shows the world the essence of the relationship between Jesus and God, or to use terms that were already current even when John wrote his gospel, between Father and Son.

That of course makes this prayer very timely. But this prayer is always timely, for regardless of whatever fantasies we may entertain about a golden past, and whatever fears we may harbor about the present moment, the Church has always been divided in some ways, and always on the verge of further division. From the moment Paul went to Antioch and "opposed Cephas (Peter) to his face" over the issue of table fellowship with gentiles, right up to our present divisions over sexual orientation, Christians have been of different minds about nearly everything. Sometimes those divisions have been fully

resolved, and sometimes they have resulted in minor splits, and sometimes, as in the Reformation, they have been positively cataclysmic, and changed the whole face of Christianity. It is therefore always appropriate to pause for a moment and remember where the true source of this unity arises, and what constitutes it. That is all I propose to do this morning.

It is clear from the passage that the source of this unity is God, to whom Jesus is at that moment praying. Notice that Jesus is not asking the disciples to present the gospel in such a fashion as to make sure everyone ends up in agreement with them. Nor is he telling them to build an institutional framework that will ultimately encompass all Christians. He is praying to God that God will create a sense of unity in the hearts of all those who will in future call themselves Christians that will bind everyone together. This is an important thing to remember, and it is one that is often forgotten. Our unity is not the product either of doctrinal conformity or institutional authority. This is not to say that those things don't matter at all, or that they can't symbolize that larger unity, but they are not the source of the unity and they don't prove it exists.

We all know this from our own experience. The sense of unity I experience in my own immediate family as well as in my extended family has nothing to do with any sort of general agreement on much of anything. I number among my wife and children, mother, uncles and aunts, cousins, nieces

and nephews, brothers and sisters in law and even one son in law, people who are Republicans, Democrats, independents and libertarians. We have many career military people, three of whom became general officers, and we have as well some who filed for status as a conscientious objector during the Viet Nam war. My family has both gay and straight people, devoutly religious people, agnostics and perhaps even an atheist or two. There is not a single opinion about either church or state that all of us agree upon, nor is there a single institution we all understand in exactly the same way, or consider to be of the same importance and value.

In this I am completely average; everyone here can say precisely the same thing about your extended families. What binds my extended family together then – and I dare say all of yours as well - is not doctrinal or institutional, and indeed every attempt to enforce uniformity in either of those directions, as when we end up arguing with one another about social, political or religious issues, serves to drive us apart temporarily rather than bring us closer together. What binds us together then is nothing more nor less than the extent to which we truly care about each other and, insofar as time and distance and resources allow, live for each other. That is the source of our unity, and that is how people can tell that we are family. My uncle will never understand my gay cousin and his spouse, and he will never get used to, much less grow to appreciate the relationship those two people have. But when the family

invitations went out for his ninetieth birthday party and family reunion they were on the list, and they came to that party. To the extent that the world was watching - it wasn't of course - that is how the world would know that this large extended family is one. The source of our family unity, in other words, is our sense of caring for each other, including each other, living for each other in whatever modest ways we do that regardless of whether or not we agree or even understand one another.

When Jesus prays to God the Father “that they may be one, as we are one” he is, I believe pointing exactly to that fact of life, for he is asking God to inspire each generation of Christians to become one by living for each other as God the Father lives for God the Son, and God the Son lives for God the Father. He is praying that we, us here today, may find our unity to be of the same character and inspiration as that which unites Jesus with God the Father. What is that if it isn't the bond formed by a love which creates a full and complete mutuality of commitment? This is why John concludes this section of the prayer with the words “so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” So here then we see that the source of our unity is God, and what constitutes that unity is the grace of God which leads us to live not just with, but for one another.

I hope this helps us see the kind of unity to which we are called here in this church, and it helps us to see as well the nature of the real threat to that

unity. The unity to which God calls us both at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, and in the larger Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion does not depend upon contriving to create agreement among ourselves on any of several issues we could name. That unity depends rather upon our openness to the grace of God that creates in us the capacity to forgive and forbear, and to live for each other. The threat to that unity therefore arises not from honest disagreement over important matters. It doesn't to my mind even arise from a decision to leave and form a new branch of the Church. The threat to the unity Christ prays for arises only when we stop caring for and about each other; it arises when the animosity generated by doctrinal, social or political disagreements becomes so great that people begin to fear and despise each other. That is where our unity is threatened, that is where we begin to come apart. When the world sees that Christians can't abide each other then no matter how much doctrinal agreement there may be, no matter how monolithic the institution itself may be, and no matter how unified on the surface the Church appears, the world will not see the unity for which Christ prays. But when the world sees that despite our differences we care deeply for one another, when the world sees that we want to work for the best for one another, then regardless of how many different denominations there are, the world sees precisely the unity for which Christ prayed, and sees as well the model of God's will for all people.

The institutions we build, and the doctrines we develop in an honest attempt to approximate in human voice the good news of what God has done in Christ can be living symbols of that deeper unity for which Jesus prays in our passage for today. But those very institutions and doctrines can as well be means by which that very unity is destroyed, and they can as well be means by which genuine disunity is disguised. What cannot be faked is God's gift of the capacity to live for each other, as the Father lives for the Son and the Son for the Father, and this is why it is the only basis for true unity not only in the Church, but in the world we all now inhabit. Where that unity is absent no surface amity can survive for long, and where that unity is present no division, no matter how profound it seems, can drive people apart. So let us join today in that prayer to God, that we may be one in the way that Christ is one with God, that the world may see the true power of the gospel, and glimpse the presence of God's kingdom here on earth.