

Sunday, April 25, 2021

7th Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26, Psalm 1, 1 John 5:9-13, John 17:6-19

The Lord's Prayer

Greeting: Grace and peace to you from our God and father and our Lord and savior Christ Jesus.

Before I start my sermon on the gospel reading for today, I thought I would give you a bit of context. It can be confusing on Sunday when we are following along with our gospel readings, especially during this season of Easter. As you know, we just a few weeks ago celebrated the resurrection of Jesus and his post-resurrection appearances to the disciples. As a result, we begin to think about moving forward. Yet, today we have instead moved back in the story. Our gospel reading this morning takes place following the final Passover of Jesus and his disciples. Just before his betrayal by Judas in the garden. So this is the last time Jesus will be with them before the crucifixion. Imagining how difficult it will for the disciples to stay together after his death, Jesus prays for them a prayer of unity.

A brief survey of the landscape of Christian groups tells us that this prayer seems, for now, to have gone unanswered. There are dozens, maybe hundreds of denominations, just in the United States alone. While some have declared "fellowship" or even "full communion" with one another, even these agreements are sometimes more uneasy truces than "oneness." In too many ways, the church has become a reflection of the fractured world we live in. It is a world where an utter sense of belonging to each other is gone. At times, it seems as if each of us has found a way to become stranded islanders. Even though we are all in the same place, we are together and yet not together.

The duo Simon and Garfunkel, back in the mid 1960s, recorded a song about isolation and loneliness called "I am a Rock." In this song, they sing about the hurt and pain that often result when we open ourselves to others in love. The lyrics they use are haunting words about struggles to allow ourselves to love and be loved. "Don't talk of love. Well, I've heard the word before. It's sleeping in my memory. I won't disturb the slumber of feelings that have died. If I never loved, I never would have cried." I wonder if this 60 year old song doesn't resonate with us today.

In the church, we have a way of talking about how we are together and not together, failing to live as Jesus prayed. We call that failing: sin. Sin is the thing

that separates us from one another. It is more than things that we do wrong. Sin is, above all else, our turning in on ourselves, islands as it were. We may have solidarity with others in this separation, but it is a perverse form of oneness. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," says Paul. But the very thing we share in common keeps us from the oneness that Jesus prays for. We each got our own way. We put up barriers to relationships with one another. We are prevented from experiencing the reconciliation and wholeness that Jesus prayed we might share. But there is hope even as we recognize our own sinfulness.

If we are caught in sin, how then is there hope? How can we hope for oneness? Could it be that this oneness Jesus prays for begins for us in baptism, when we are immersed into the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? This is more than a simple new identity. This is being brought into the story of God's love for all humanity. This is an initiation into God's way of being in the world. Our baptism declares that we no longer live as ourselves and for ourselves alone. (We are still sinful, yes, but we are now also God's Children!) We are initiated into a process of death and life, of daily dying to sin and rising to the new life of God with us and in us. We are made God's children; to live in God's name.

In the ancient world, and even in some corners of today's world, when you act in someone else's name, you have a responsibility to act the way that person would act, were they here. For us, then, to be God's children in the world means to trust God's way of being as our way. This is the heart of an active definition of faith: the act of trusting God's way of being as our way. Baptism frees us from the bondage of our sin, allowing us to live in love for the other. And if baptism invites us to that life, God's word and meal, the things we gather around in worship feed us for this way of being.

We may not recognize it and surely may not live it, but we are one. We are one in God's word and story. We are one in Christ, his body and blood. We are one in each other in forgiveness and reconciliation. All of these make us one in mission, God's mission, to unite all things in and under God's love.

In all of these things and more, we are one, just as Jesus and his Abba are one. It is often hard to see this kind of oneness because it is messy and complicated, as is anything of value in our lives of faith. But once you see it, you realize that Jesus' prayer is being answered every day, in impossible and implausible ways. And we are invited to join in the prayer with our own petitions and our whole lives. May we be one, even as our Lord, Jesus, prayed.