

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER, B
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Psalm 1
I John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

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When a person is near death, if they have the strength, they often leave behind final words for those they love. They may have conversations or write letters or even make a video. What we have from John's gospel today is this kind of communication from Jesus. Not a video (though that would be awesome) but Jesus' farewell words for those who follow him, and a final prayer.

There is so much Jesus wants to say to us and to God as he goes to the cross. Jesus prays for our protection, for our joy in faith, and for our unity in him. I've been reflecting especially on his prayer for unity-- that *we may all be one*, just as Jesus and the Creator are one. What are we asking when we pray for unity in the church, or in a family, or a community? What does it mean to *be one*, as Jesus understands it?

To *be one* in a congregation like ours might seem like a tall order. We're a diverse bunch, and glad of it. We come together from a variety of neighborhoods and walks of life. We're all different ages and backgrounds and incomes, married and single and divorced, gay and straight, employed and unemployed and retired. At any given worship service it might seem like you have nothing whatsoever in common with the people who share a pew with you --- except the most important thing: We are all claimed by God through Jesus and summoned into the way of Christ.

And that one thing is what makes Christian unity possible. Being one in Christ is not about walking lockstep or being identical. It's about having Jesus Christ as our common bond.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who courageously opposed Hitler, wrote a classic book on Christian community called *Life Together*. He reminds us that in Christian community we don't relate to each other on the basis of whether we like or dislike someone personally. Instead, we meet each other as *the people we are in Christ's eyes*. When we look at each other through Christ's eyes, Bonhoeffer says, then "I am a brother [or sister] to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me...; the other person has become a brother [or sister] to me through what Jesus Christ did for [them]." (*Life Together*, Harper & Row, 1954, p 25)

Seeing our relationship through the eyes of Christ frees us from trying to control other people, and it also frees us to support their journey of living out who they are as God's person. When we see each other through Christ's eyes, then we value each person as a unique and worthy individual. Everybody matters. Everybody has value. And every person is encouraged to grow and develop fully as a human being, to become the best person they can be. In fact, this is the way God intends for all true human com-

munity to be, in families, in friendships, in cities, even globally. We Christians stand as an example -- not a perfect example, but a set-apart group where God's dream for human community can be lived out.

And this community is much more than it appears to be. Not just a gathering of people, but a place where God's own Spirit dwells.

I went to a PTA meeting at our kids' school the other night. It was a lot like a church meeting -- we were dealing with budget, it went late into the evening - I felt right at home! And I did feel a kinship with those good people, a sense of common concern for our kids and keeping the school strong. But there was one crucial difference from church. After a person's favorite budget item had been approved or rejected, several of them felt free to go on home. It was understood we had come together to accomplish certain tasks, but not to belong to one another in an enduring way, the way we do here. When our kids finish elementary school, I won't be part of that PTA any more. But you and I will belong to God's church forever -- into eternity, actually. We're going to be part of this congregation for a long, long time!

And unlike any PTA, we belong to each other not just through common projects, but through the common bond of God's Spirit. We open ourselves to God's presence. We pray for each other and we help each other. If anyone has a need in this congregation, it should be known, it should be addressed. We have a lot of resources here to support one another in all kinds of ways. And not the least of these is through listening and learning to know each other well.

That's an expression a wise friend often used -- "learning to know each other." It implies that it takes some time to understand and really know another person. And in the Christian community we are called to take that time. To listen well, to bear with each other. This is countercultural in our busy electronic world. But learning to know each other may be one of the greatest gifts of being one in Christ.

Of course there's nothing perfect about Christian community. Jesus knew the dangers of conflict and division. That's why he prayed for our unity, that we'd be free from destructive conflict that could divide us.

In the course of history, we've seen Christians make terrible mistakes, trying to stamp out conflicts and dissent. Christians have shunned, excommunicated, held heresy trials and inquisitions to enforce uniformity of belief. One author asks, "How can a religion that speaks so eloquently of love so brutally destroy its questioners, dissenters, and innovators?" (Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Harper, 2006, p. 150)

God has a bigger dream, for us and for all humanity. God has the dream of unity-in-diversity. At times this involves tension -- but when we see each other through Christ's eyes, it can be creative tension. The same author reflects that, "Jesus welcomed children, sinners, tax collectors, fishermen, women, thieves, traitors, Roman soldiers, faithful Jews, lepers, those who were deaf and blind, the poor and outcast." His group was

one of the most diverse imaginable. “And when Jesus called people, he never said, ‘Come with me, and you will become just like the rest of us.’ He did not say that his followers would be alike; he said that despite their differences, they would be changed by love... Love would open the way for people who were different to be reconciled... and model God’s dream of *shalom/peace*.” (p. 149)

It may be a particular challenge here in the Pacific Northwest, where our pioneer independence tends to work against community. Since the days of the Oregon Trail, people have come West pursuing their individual dreams. And many people are still all about beginning again, reinventing themselves, or moving on to the next item of interest. Northwesterners are not noted for being loyal to organizations. If something doesn’t go their way, they are just as likely to opt out of a group and leave as to stay and work things through. It can be difficult to form Christian relationships in this setting. Jesus knows the danger, and he prays for our unity, that we would remain committed, not only to him but to each other.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, challenges us on this. He lifts up the African word *ubuntu* which means, “I cannot be without you.” He says Africans believe that “a person is a person *through* other persons” – that is, we become who we are through a delicate network of interdependence with those around us. He says, “The truth is we need each other. We cannot survive without each other.” And Tutu goes on to say,

In God’s family there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian—all belong... God’s dream wants us to be brothers and sisters, wants us to be family... In our world we can survive only together. We can be truly free, ultimately, only together. We can be human only together. (from *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, 2004, pp. 19-29; quoted in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass, 2006, 151-2)

It’s not just about what happens within churches, obviously. Christ intends for us to learn something here that will be expressed through all society. The church is a kind of training ground that helps to shape us into just, compassionate, and mature human beings who enrich God’s world.

A friend of mine has often mentioned how her congregation played a big part in her process of maturing as a young adult. She was on the Council and other committees, and together they faced challenging decisions and projects that tested even the wisest among them— a great way to learn leadership. My friend freely admits that she flew off the handle a few times and made mistakes along the way. But the church people were patient, they bore with her, and together all of them grew.

Christian community is a training ground for a fully loving human life. It’s an incubator where God shows us who we can grow to be.

God is working in me, as God is working in each of you, through the gift of Christian community. God is pushing our boundaries, shaping our spirits, drawing out our voices, opening our ears, softening our prejudices, making firm our commitment to Christ. And while God is teaching us, God is also supporting us – God is adding God's love to our love and God's energy to our energy. And Christ is interceding for us still. Christ's prayer has power for us still. Thanks be to God. Amen.