

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for May 24, 2020 ~ Easter 7A

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We find ourselves in a serious predicament, with the Coronavirus death rate nearing 100,000 and climbing in the U.S. Many are suffering from the disease and others are suffering from isolation, confinement, unemployment, or other related circumstances over which they have little or no control. And, for those of us in this diocese, we received the sad news last week that the Supreme Court of Texas has handed down a ruling that is not favorable to us. Our longstanding legal conflict with other Christians with whom we disagree has taken a huge toll and it appears that will continue for some time into the future.

It is in this predicament that we hear the words of St. Peter, exhorting us to be “steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” The experience of those First Century followers of Jesus was different from the kind of worldwide experience in which we find ourselves. But the exhortation of St. Peter applies to us as well as to them. In addition to the threat of disease and death, there is the experience of separateness, isolation, and estrangement that requires that we discipline ourselves in order to preserve ourselves for a better time that is yet to come. And in our hearts we know that this time is just as significant as the time to come.

So, we yearn to know God’s will and we ache for God’s will to be done on earth, right here, as it is in heaven. That’s our prayer, isn’t it? In today’s gospel, Jesus prays for us. Jesus’ high priestly prayer for all his followers is a prayer about unity. The unity for which he prays does not refer to some absolute conformity or to an absence of differences of opinion. The unity for which Jesus prays is unity in relationships – a oneness of heart that binds diverse spirits together. It wouldn’t be a bad idea for us to memorize this portion of Jesus’ prayer and let our relationships be guided by it. For us to conduct our relationships in a manner consistent with the prayer of Jesus makes our claim to be his followers believable.

This is true in the area of unity among Christian churches. One of the greatest contributions toward Christian unity in the past 400 years is the ecumenical work that has been done to produce a lectionary that is shared by most major Christian churches. It is encouraging to be reminded that the gospel passage we just heard is also being read today in tens of thousands of other places across the lines that divide us. It helps us feel solidarity with Christians in other traditions. It also is sad because we know there are still barriers between us, not the least of which concerns the Lord’s Table. Before COVID-19, we would read this prayer Jesus prayed for us, and after we finish preaching on its subject, many of us would go to separate altars. Sadly, we know that will still be the case when we are able to celebrate the Holy Eucharist again.

The barriers to unity among Christians are largely artificial ones, designed to protect power structures or to nurse feelings that were hurt generations ago. But Christian unity is more important than the hierarchies and hurts and doctrinal peculiarities of any “party” of Christians. Why? Our Savior expressed why in his prayer - because we are in the world to show forth his glory, to do his work, and

to express in our own manner of living the oneness expressed in the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And all of this is so that the world might believe! When you and I involve ourselves in sharing our faith with a sister or brother in another part of Christ's Body, we take a small but very important *relational* step toward a greater unity and become a part of the answer to Christ's beautiful prayer, "that they may be one."

Unity of relationships is important to congregational life as well. Catherine de Hueck Doherty, founder of Madonna House in Canada, has written a very interesting thing. She says:

"I know the price of making a family out of human beings, both a blood family and a spiritual family. The price is high, but so was the price that Christ paid for us. We have to be like seeds in his hands, cast out to the four winds by the Spirit into the soil he has chosen. The harvest he desires is primarily unity among yourselves. Then strangers will come and cease to be strangers, because your family, your community of love, will encompass them and heal them after it has healed you."

In our relationships with one another we have experienced that for which our Lord prayed. It has healed us and thus has healed others. The more of this unity we have, the better our stewardship will be and there will be abundant resources to do all the things we know God is calling us to do. The more of this unity we have, the more effective our service to others will be. Our most effective witness to this community, to our denomination, and to the world, is the spirit of unity among ourselves in this unbelievably diverse and intricately textured congregation. No one of us or small group can do it alone. It's for all of us to experience and enjoy and, in so doing, make our witness credible. There is indeed a beautiful spirit of unity in this St. Martin's family. It is attractive and inviting. Everybody has enough estrangement. So, when people seek a spiritual home, they want one where people dwell in unity and peace. There are people in this parish who would tell you that they are alive today because God led them to us. Christ is beckoning all his sisters and brothers into a deeper unity in our relationships as those who have been baptized into Christ, who have died with him so that we might rise with him to the new life where unity overcomes estrangement.

Ultimately this principle of unity in relationships has its beginning and its end in our relationship with the Risen and Ascended Lord. Jesus and the Father are one with the promised Holy Spirit. There is a perfect unity in their relationship. Jesus prayed then and continues to pray that we will have that same perfect unity with him.

When we are one with Christ, barriers fall, distinctions between persons become unimportant, differences in doctrine take second place, and disagreements are resolved. Our witness to the Church at home and abroad takes on a glory and a power we never knew before. Our efforts in the areas of peace and justice bear fruit. We do not "accomplish" that unity. No, in fact, in most cases we are addicted to behavior that resists and undermines it. The unity Christ desires for his Church comes through grace, in answer to his prayer, to those who will receive it. It involves being receptive to the possibility of reconciliation that is just too much for us to accomplish on our own.

In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom tells how she and her sister Betsy were interned at the Nazi camp at Ravensbruck. Betsy died there, and Corrie dreaded the day when, after the war, she might encounter one of their captors. It happened one day in Munich, where Corrie was giving her testimo-

ny at a rally. There was a former SS officer there who had stood guard at the showers in the camp. Corrie looked up and suddenly he was facing her.

“How grateful I am for your message, fraulein,” he said. “To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!” The man thrust out his hand to Corrie, but she could not take it. She felt shame and guilt coursing through her body. “Lord Jesus,” she prayed, “forgive me and help me to forgive him.” But nothing happened. There was no warmth or forgiveness in her. Again she prayed, “Jesus, I cannot forgive him; give me your forgiveness.” Struggling with herself, she took the man's hand. And as she did, she writes, “The most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that overwhelmed me.” He asks us to overcome whatever divides us from one another, and then gives us the only power in the universe capable of doing what he asks us to do. Oneness among ourselves is the fruit of Christ's oneness with us.

John's gospel is permeated with the idea of the indwelling Christ. All creation is by and in Christ. There is no more intimate relationship than this. It is the one relationship that we must have if life is to be worth living. It is the glory of life transformed, redeemed, and made holy. As we seek this relationship with Christ, we are compelled to seek the same kind of relationship with one another. Then, we become living answers to his high priestly prayer for our oneness. Or, as the decree on ecumenism from Vatican II expresses it: “Cooperation among all Christians vividly expresses that bond which already unites them and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant.”