

Easter 7, Year C

June 2, 2019

John 17:20-26

(After the Last Supper, Jesus prayed for his disciples. He then spoke to his Heavenly Father): “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

A while back, I read a news story about a tow truck driver who was called to the scene of an accident on an Interstate Highway in order to tow a wrecked car. The tow truck driver started to hook up the car to his truck when he saw a bumper sticker on the car for a political candidate whom he was *not* fond of. He immediately unhooked the car and told the owner of the car that he could not tow her car because she supported this particular candidate. The tow truck driver, who claims he is a Christian, said, “Something came over me, I think the Lord came to me, and He just said, ‘Get in the truck and leave.’ And when I got in my truck, you know, I was so proud, because I felt like I finally drew a line in the sand and stood up for what I believed.”¹

Now, I don’t mention this news article in order to cast aspersions on one tow truck driver, but rather because I think it is so easy for any **one** of us to fall into the same kind of mistake: confusing our strongly held *opinions* with the Christian faith. I have no doubt that the tow truck driver, if he is a Christian, had at one point heard Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, wherein a Jewish man is beaten and left “half dead” along the road. In the parable, it is not any of the Jewish man’s fellow Jews who stop to help, but rather a Samaritan, an *enemy* of the Jews. I also have no doubt that the tow truck driver had, at *some* time in his Bible reading, come across the passages where Jesus says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you... bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:27-28) “...so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...” (Matt. 5:44-45)

And then there is today’s Gospel passage. The setting is the Upper Room, immediately following the Last Supper and Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet – two acts of intimate community which Jesus shares even with Peter, whom he *knows* will soon deny him, and with Judas, whom he *knows* will soon betray him.

Jesus is nearing the end of his long farewell address on this night before his death, and he concludes with an extended prayer – for himself, for his disciples, and – in today’s passage – for **us**. “Heavenly Father,” Jesus prays, “I ask not only on behalf of these [disciples of mine], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word...”

That’s you and I, my friends. *We* are the ones who believe in Christ through the word of his first followers, most notably in the writings of the New Testament. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus was praying for *us*, for you and me, and for all his followers who are alive today. So let’s listen again to Jesus’ prayer, this time being aware that when Jesus says “they” he means you and I, and all of his followers alive today. And let us imagine, for a moment, that Jesus is speaking to **our** current situation in the United States of America.

“I pray, Father,” Jesus says, “that they [we who are followers of Jesus in America today] may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they [we followers of Jesus in America today] may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become *completely* one...” (John 17:21-23)

My friends, I cannot *reconcile* these words of Jesus with the message that the tow truck driver believed **he** heard from Jesus – to drive away and not help that woman, because he disagreed with her politics. If Jesus could wash Judas’ feet knowing that just moments later Judas would betray him, couldn’t the driver, avowedly a follower of Jesus, tow this stranded woman’s car? And that tow truck driver is but one example of a much wider divisiveness *rampant* in America today, the reverberations of which, we must realize, affect the **souls** of each one of us, drawing us – most often without our conscious awareness – *into* the spirit of divisiveness and polarization at large in our world, *away* from our **true** identity and unity in Christ, and *away* from the love of our neighbors, which Jesus commands.

Christian author and pastor A.W. Tozer wrote, “Unity in Christ is not something to be achieved; it is something to be recognized.”² In other words, our fundamental **reality** is that we *are* members of the one Body of Christ; and, as St. Paul said, the eye cannot say to the hand, “I do not need you.” (1 Cor. 12:21) Our foundational unity doesn’t mean uniformity; an eye is not a hand or a foot or an ear. We are different parts; but that does not mean we are not all members of the one Body of Christ. In his Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul wrote, “I... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called... bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (4:1-6)

My friends, my mother and father disagreed on some things, but that in no way compromised their marriage. Democratic strategist James Carville and Republican strategist Mary Matalin fell in love, got married in 1993, raised 2 daughters, and this year celebrate their 26th anniversary. We members of Christ Church may disagree with one another on certain things, but that **doesn't** compromise our unity as the Body of Christ in this place. Richard Rohr has said that among all the saintly people he has known or read about, one common characteristic among them is this: They have the humility to admit that they might be wrong. Jesus never said, "I give you a new commandment: 'Thou shalt be right';" rather, he said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you..." (John 13:34) So why are so many Christians today so *totally* focused on **their** being right, and **others** being wrong? Where *is* the **love** for one another that Jesus so clearly commands, and so clearly exemplified in his life and on the cross?

On the same day I read the article about the tow truck driver, I ran across a quote from the science fiction writer Robert Heinlein, who said: "You can sway a thousand men by appealing to their prejudices quicker than you can convince one man by logic."³ And, my friends, candidates running for political office **know** this, and exploit it to the full. We *must* be on guard that we are not hooked by this shameless tactic in the political campaigns which are beginning to ramp up.

Where did this propensity toward a dualistic, "us vs. them" mentality come from? One theory is that it evolved in our limbic brain, the seat of our emotions, as a means for members of primitive tribes to survive against those forces – animal or human – which threatened their safety. But we must be keenly aware that while this predisposition toward "being against" may have evolved by natural selection as a means of protection in the wild, that does not mean that God **wants** you and me to give free *reign* to these oppositional, often violent tendencies. For while it may *feel* right (the tow truck driver felt great for having "drawn a line in the sand," and voters respond enthusiastically to negative campaigning) - though opposition, polarization, and attack may *feel* right, that does not necessarily mean that it is of God. I think that's where the tow truck driver – and so many of us! – miss the mark: equating a "good feeling," or a rush of oppositional adrenaline, with God's approval. We must continually try to discern the **source** of our feelings, attitudes, convictions, and motivations: are they coming from that primitive, limbic part of our brains, or are they coming from the indwelling Spirit of Christ? It is so easy to make the **serious** mistake of *equating* the two – when in reality, they could **not** be more different. The limbic system's oppositional response emanates from a place of fear, while the response of Christ emanates from divine love. And "Perfect love casts out fear," as St. John tells us in his First Letter. (1 John 4:18)

In the Catechism at the back of our Prayer Book, we read: "What is the mission of the Church? *Answer:* The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." (p. 855) To restore all people to unity

with God and each other in Christ. My friends, at this time in our history, I believe we who follow Jesus are being strongly called to that very mission: to witness in our lives to this foundational **unity**, which is so different from the polarizing, oppositional attitudes which seem to have gained sway among so many of us in our world today. You and I are being called to hold in mind the image of Jesus sharing an intimate meal with Judas and washing Judas' feet. We are being called to remember the story of the Good Samaritan, in which Jesus clearly makes the point that love and compassion are far more important than ethnic, religious, and political differences. We are called to remember the instructions of Jesus: “**Love** your enemies, do **good** to those who hate you... **bless** those who curse you, **pray** for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:27-28) “...so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...” (Matt. 5:44-45) We are being called to remember the words of Jesus from just a few Sundays ago: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35) Jesus never said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you draw a line in the sand...”

Finally, we are being called to remember that in his farewell address, his last will and testament, Jesus' greatest concern – what he prayed for fervently and repeatedly in today's Gospel – was for unity between all his followers, himself, and God.

My friends, if we can remember these things, and live accordingly, we can help turn the tide from the oppositional, divisive spirit rampant in our world today toward a spirit of love and unity. And *then* the farewell prayer of Christ will have come closer to being answered.

AMEN

¹ http://www.rawstory.com/2016/05/trump-loving-tow-truck-driver-says-god-told-him-to-leave-bernie-sanders-supporter-stranded/#.Vyvavj_Tr7g.facebook

² A. W. Tozer (1897-1963), *God Tells the Man Who Cares*, Moody, 2006, p. 36

³ from *Revolt in 2100/Methuselah's Children*