

7 Easter C May 8, 2016

What the World does not Know

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A word has popped up in the news and media this past week, and I don't see it disappearing any time soon. The word unity. We heard it when Pope Francis received the Charlemagne Prize a few days ago, a prize given every year to a person who has significantly contributed to European unity. When he received the award, the pope made a moving speech about his vision and dream of a Europe that can rise above its fear to be inclusive and compassionate to people of all ages and races, especially of immigrants.

Closer to home, we heard the word unity in American politics as we get ever closer to the Presidential election in November, and pundits are now questioning whether candidates of both political parties will be able to unite their parties and the country. With so much evidence of division in our country, and abroad, it seems a growing concern is the ability of leaders to unify their people. Which is why I believe we'll be hearing the word *unity* a lot more in the months to come.

Since we're likely to be hearing the word so much, this might be a good time to reflect on what the word unity means. Dictionaries tell us the word means being one, or of one mind, lacking diversity. But I'm not sure that fits with the idea of unity in our Gospel today.

Today's Gospel lesson from John's Gospel is a small section of a much longer prayer often called the "high priestly prayer" of Jesus because Jesus is interceding on behalf of his disciples and all who will believe in him. The author of John's Gospel puts this prayer after the Last Supper and before Jesus' arrest, it is a prayer that shows Jesus' great love for his disciples and his vision and hope for them and sums up Jesus purpose and ministry. The section we just heard shows Jesus praying for unity among his followers: at least that is what all those lovely words about being one seem to point to.

We might wonder what Jesus meant when he prayed about his disciples being one like Jesus is one with his father. Did Jesus mean the kind of unity that is of being of the same mind? Did Jesus want all his disciples to be copies of him?

Or of each other? Were they all supposed to do the same thing as Jesus? If we read on we'd find out they didn't. It can get tricky trying to figure Jesus out. And I'm not sure the dictionary definition is all that helpful.

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, speaker, and author has a deeply intriguing definition of unity in the book she co-authored with former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams called *Uncommon Gratitude*. In the book she writes: "Unity.....is more than solidarity and more than uniformity. Unity...is a commitment to becoming one people who speak in a thousand voices. Rather than one message repeated by a thousand voices, unity is a message shaped by a thousand minds."

This definition seems to get closer to what Jesus was talking about in his prayer when he was praying for his followers to be one.

While this prayer comes before Jesus arrest, trial, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension in John's Gospel, for us here today, we've already walked through all those events spiritually and liturgically. We've been through the journey of Holy Week: we've sat at the table with Jesus, some of us have even had our feet washed, we've been at the foot of the cross, wept outside the tomb, celebrated Jesus' resurrection, and just a few days ago we acknowledged Jesus ascension, his return to God's right hand. For us, we are in a liturgical in-between time: a time where Jesus has ascended and in so doing has given to his followers his mission to spread the love of God to the whole world, but we have not yet celebrated the feast of Pentecost (we'll be doing that next Sunday), which is the day we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit who gives the inspiration and power to fulfill the mission Jesus gave. Sometimes it is like that, sometimes we are given a task to do, but are not yet ready to do it. Sometimes there is a space in between a calling or a commission and embarking on the actual endeavor. And during times like that, remembering and reflecting on what has happened can be a way to see new insights and help prepare a person for what is to come.

Perhaps that is why the lectionary took us back to this part of Jesus' prayer today, to help us learn how to live in those in-between spaces in our lives, and to reflect on what it means to be one with or united in Christ.

In Jesus' prayer, he not only talks about being one, he talks about his mission: that the world would know God's love through him. And that is what his prayer of unity is about: that we who believe in Jesus will show the same love

Jesus showed to the world so that everyone in the world will know God. That is where diversity is needed, because one way of showing love may not work with all people in all places. This love we have been so richly blessed to know, many of us have been so blessed to grow up in, can't be kept in this one place, we have to find ways to take it outside our doors, where we'll find lots of different people.

I hear such powerful stories about how our KAIROS volunteers do this. For those who are unfamiliar with this ministry, KAIROS is an intentional outreach to people who are incarcerated or in prison. KAIROS is sort of like Cursillo, volunteers put together a weekend of spiritual talks and music for prisoners that take place in the prisons, these weekends happen once or twice a year and are followed up with weekly get-togethers where volunteers return to prison to listen to and talk with the prisoners to see how they are growing spiritually. Last Sunday I had the privilege to attend a KAIROS closing ceremony. Part of the ceremony includes the opportunity for the prisoners to share what the experience of the KAIROS weekend was like for them. Each time I attend I am struck by how not just one or two or even the majority but all the prisoners always say that weekend was the first time they have ever experienced unconditional love.

I am struck by that because I can't imagine what it would be like to never know the love of God in Christ; the comfort of it, the challenge of it, the joy of it. Yet it seems there are many who don't know that kind of love.

In that way, Jesus' words in his prayer are just as relevant and real today as they ever were: the world does not know the love Jesus showed. And as the KAIROS closings always remind me: there is a deep need to share this love.

Something interesting about the volunteers of KAIROS that can show us unity: they aren't all Episcopalian. In fact the volunteers from Good Shepherd will tell you they are in the minority. All KAIROS volunteers are church goers, but most are from denominations that are quite different from the Episcopal Church. The volunteers often disagree about theology, inclusiveness, and ecclesiology, yet despite their differences and disagreements they are unified, at least in the way Sr. Joan Chittister defined unity, because they all know the love of God in Jesus, and they all want to share that love with someone in the world. Sharing that love with prisoners is more important than their differences. That is what I believe Jesus was praying for.

We can all live into Jesus' vision and help the world see God's love. We don't have to go to prison to do it. Free lunch servers also know that awesome sensation of giving love with every meal they serve, whether it is to someone they know or have never met. Prayer shawl knitters know it to. So can any of us when we simply smile at the people we pass on sidewalks or in grocery stores, showing God's love really can start with acknowledgement and a smile.

While we will undoubtedly continue to hear about the ways the world is changing, how we are to respond to those changes, and the ways we will need to unify, perhaps we also need to remember there is a unity we are called to live into, a unity that isn't about looking the same, but is about sharing and showing the love of God that is forgiving, renewing, healing, and acknowledges everyone. This is a mission we aren't on alone, we have Christ and each other, even when we disagree. That is perhaps the image the world needs right now more than ever: that despite differences, it is possible to come together through God's love.