

## ***That they may all be one***

The Seventh Sunday of Easter, June 2, 2019

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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*Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." John 17:20-26*

According to a well-known and widely-respected essay by a pastor and author named Speed Leas, conflicts in churches tend to conform to a basic model with five increasingly destructive levels. These same levels of conflict often can translate to other contexts: a marriage or business partnership that is faltering, or in a context as large-scale as the conduct of our public life and civil – or uncivil – discourse as a nation.

In Level One of a church conflict, according to Speed Leas, a problem is identified, and there is disagreement about how to solve the problem, but no one thinks in terms of winners and losers. The parties draw on a repository of goodwill and an underlying agreement about the church's mission.

In a Level Two conflict, personalities come to the fore. The original issue may become fuzzy as power dynamics and mistrust and rumors come into play.

At Level Three, alliances begin to form. Members are enlisted to take sides. Facts become distorted in the service of increasingly polarized views.

By Level Four, the sides have solidified. Lines have been drawn. To consort with *those people* on the other side is treason. "*Everything we've ever stood for is at stake!*" "*We won't survive unless the evil one is exterminated.*" The actual mission and values of the church are by now lost. Many members distance themselves until the storm blows over, or they leave the congregation entirely.

Level Five is a Bonfire of the Vanities. Anarchy. Revenge. Schism.<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if Jesus saw all of this coming. I wonder if Jesus knew that his Body would be broken into hundreds of diverse traditions, denominations and sects, most of them imagining that "*our faith, our worship, our translation of the Bible, our architecture, our clergy or our music ministry*" represents the one and only true faith.

On the night before he died for us, Jesus "*loved his own who were in the world [and] he loved them to the end.*" (John 13:1) He washed their feet. He watched his betrayer go out into the night. And then at length, with those who remained, he shared his last thoughts and his last hopes for them. He reminded them of his own divine origin and nature, his relationship with his heavenly Father. He repeatedly invited them into loving relationship, through him, with this same Father in heaven and with one another. He spoke as if this relationship of divine love could become the very foundation of their being and a way of life, even in this broken and warring world.

And then Jesus prayed for them. Today's gospel reading is a portion of that prayer, often called the 'high priestly prayer of Jesus.' When this prayer ends, in the next verse following today's text, the Passion of Jesus begins.

In the portion of this prayer that we heard today, Jesus prays for us! He has already prayed for the eleven remaining primal followers, those whom we now call apostles. And then the focus of his prayer shifts: Father, "*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.*" Jesus is praying for us! And what is the first and primary focus of this part of the prayer? "*... that they may all be one.*"

Jesus goes on to articulate what may seem like an impossibly high standard: "*As you, Father, 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.*" According to this prayer, the oneness that Jesus envisions will draw the world into the knowledge and love of God in Christ.

I suppose I don't need to tell you how often and how badly we the church have failed to be the Church for which Jesus prayed. And I probably don't need to enumerate the sorrowful outcomes of our failures where conflict is concerned. And I gather I don't need to tell you that finding common ground anywhere in our time is increasingly counter cultural, more often than not viewed as a sign of weakness. *Kill or be killed* is the increasingly prevailing expectation in conflicts. Furthermore, in the history of the church, unity has too often meant, and in our present culture unity too often means, rallying around hate for the enemy or rigid conformity to one narrow point of view – mine, in God's name.

I don't propose to tell you how you should or should not have lined up relative to some past church schism. To pick a current hot-button issue and like it or not, I won't tell you that true Christians must be 'pro-life' or 'pro-choice,' or pro- or anti- anything. Most of us here recognize that those labels are Level Four weaponry. I can't offer here any new revelation or instruction in the realms of our human discord or what unity in love might look like or be like. Jesus has already showed all of us. But I wonder if, at minimum, the prayer of Jesus in today's gospel might be an invitation or might provoke us to wonder about oneness-in-love in our lives.

Perhaps some of us may become better aware of our hardened impulses, our quickness to mistrust, our acrimony, how readily we categorize 'us' versus 'them.' Perhaps some of us will identify just one relationship or work environment or endeavor that has become a Level Four and wonder, before it gets to Five, if there is some courageous action we can take to identify and build on common ground in good faith, or even in love.

When last I preached, two weeks ago, I shared some information and reflection on a former Ascension parishioner, Bob Boyle, who had died the prior week. Bob's memorial service was this past Friday, and I was honored to have a part in it. A small women's choir sang at the memorial, the Rainbow Threshold Singers. I learned that there are groups of Threshold Singers all over the country and beyond. Their mission is to share simple and faithful but non-sectarian music with those who are dying and for those who have died.

One song they sang on Friday was particularly poignant. I later learned it was a well-known one-line quote by the spiritual teacher Ram Dass. In the song, the line is repeated four times in unison and then again four times in simple but beautiful harmony:

*We are all just walking each other home.*

*We are all just walking each other home.*

*We are all just walking each other home.*

*We are all just walking each other home.*

I'm sure we could all come up with a hundred other more cynical or despairing ways to finish that line.

We are all just trying to get ahead.

We are all just deceiving ourselves.

We are all doomed.

Ram Dass' ending of the line catches just a bit of the spirit of the high priestly prayer of Jesus for me. It invites both a sense of my own naked mortality and a sense of my need for others and others' need for me - whomever they may be. The need we all have for divine mercy. The yearning we share for the divine love to which we humans have often given the name God, the one whom Jesus called his heavenly Father.

Jesus prayed for us that we may be one: *"I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."* I wonder in what ways you and I already are or may be poised to become the answer to his prayer. *Amen.*