

Paul Walker June 5, 2011 Christ Episcopal Church John 17:1-11
“So That They May Be One”

In today’s gospel, Jesus prays for his disciples. “*Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.*” Jesus prays for unity among believers. It seems like Jesus prays a prayer that has largely gone unanswered. Unity among believers is hard to come by. Disunity and division have been the norm in Christian history.

I’ve just read a biography of John Knox, the Scottish reformer. His convictions were unflinching – and perhaps they had to be to spearhead the Reformation in Scotland. He had it in for the young Mary, Queen of Scots, who continued in her Roman Catholic faith.

Knox had had several private interviews with the young queen, which basically consisted of his lecturing Mary in the tenets of Protestantism and deriding her Catholic views with threats of eternal punishment if she did not repent and believe. Apparently bewildered that this approach wasn’t successful, Knox publicly called for her death from the pulpit, calling her an obstinate idolatress and all Roman Catholics deadly enemies of true believers. And those were his milder descriptions!

Even Knox’s friends were a little chagrined at his language and attitude. One wrote, “*You know the vehemence of Mr. Knox’s spirit, which cannot be bridled, and doth sometimes utter such sentences, as cannot easily be digested by a weak stomach. I would wish that he deal with Mary more gently.*” But such were the times. Heads rolled because of religion.

Such were the times, but disunity among believers can’t be blamed on external circumstances. Where does the drive toward division come from? Perhaps you’ve heard the story about the man who was shipwrecked on a desert island. Month after month went by. Soon he resigned himself to life alone on his island and began building a life for himself. Twenty years went by – he was completely alone. Then one day a ship sailed up to his island. The man was astonished. He took his rescuer on a tour of his island, which was now filled with buildings made of bamboo and thatch and baked clay.

The rescued man explained, “There’s my little house where I lived. And there’s my school where I studied. And there’s my hospital where I went when I was sick or injured. And there’s my gym, where I went to exercise.”

Then he pointed to another little building with a cross and steeple. “ And there’s my church where I went to worship.”

His rescuer pointed to another little building with a cross and steeple about 50 yards away, and asked, “Well, what’s that building?” The man answered, “That’s where I used to worship. But I couldn’t get along with the congregation there so I decided to start my own church!”

Unity is something we long for, not just among believers, but in general. Disunity hurts. Disunity in families hurts. A friend just spent 3 days with his 2 brothers and his father in New York City to celebrate his father’s 60th birthday. They all like each other! Examples like that are inspiring, but I find fairly rare. More often, the lack of unity with your wife or siblings or children or parents breeds anxiety and loneliness.

There is a prayer in the wedding service for the new couple to be a sign of Christ’s love in the world, so that “unity may overcome estrangement.” I love the image of unity overcoming estrangement. Each of us is born alone, estranged, as it were. And although we may be surrounded with people, there is an essential loneliness of the human condition.

I was talking with someone the other day about the task of translating poetry into another language. How do you capture Shakespeare’s essence in, say, Finnish? Or how about the language of the tribes that do that guttural click as part of their language? A rose by any other name would just be lost in translation.

Thinking about the difficulty of communicating exacerbates my inner existentialist. The problem of connection is far deeper than language translation. First, you’ve got to discern what you want to say, then say it in words that somehow capture the meaning of what you want to say. Then you’ve got to have a person who will hear you. That person must have the same understanding of the words you’ve chosen to use. Then that person must absorb what you say into the recesses of his or her own psyche.

Do you see how difficult the problem of communicating is? Especially when the other person is thinking about the fact that you need a haircut instead of listening to what you’re saying, or how much you remind her of her estranged son. Perhaps teenagers are onto something with texting – a

minimalist code of communication. It is hard to misinterpret LOL (Laughing Out Loud).

As a person whose calling it is to communicate, week after week, I'm well aware of this dynamic. Each Sunday we preach 4 sermons at the 4 services. But in reality, we preach 500 sermons each Sunday if there are 500 people in church. Each hears a unique sermon, dependent on mood, level of hunger, libidinal activity, crankiness, or receptivity. Little wonder that we're tired on Mondays!

All this deconstructionist talk (assuming you've understood anything I've said!) is to say that each person by birth is locked in his or her own individual isolation. We are by nature estranged from one another. When you consider sin – which is our propensity to insist on our way and further isolate ourselves – then the problem is heightened. We are not only estranged from one another (each wanting his own way), but we are also estranged from God. We need help. It is no wonder that on the night before his betrayal and arrest, Jesus prays for us. He prays for our protection and our unity.

The Bible says that it is not good for man to be alone. This is not just in relation to marriage. We need each other. We were made to be in community. Despite our existential angst, *“no man is an island entirely of itself; each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”* We are not meant to be estranged islands floating in an ocean of isolation. Left on our own, we will, like the man in the story, soon be at war with ourselves, since there is no one else with whom to fight. As I said, it is a good thing that Jesus prays for us.

I also said that, given the divisions in the church and in the world, Jesus' prayer seems like it's gone unanswered. I don't think that's true. Because any meaningful connection with another is fraught with peril, I think it is a miracle when it does actually happen.

When you feel heard and understood by someone else, it is a sure sign of God's presence in the world and in your life. When you can drop your defenses and really hear the problems that somebody else has with you, it is a sure sign that Jesus' prayer is working. When you can admit that you may be wrong about what you hold so dear and really try to see things from another's perspective – another sign of the Spirit's activity in human affairs.

When you listen to someone else and your mind doesn't wander or you don't try to finish their sentences or you don't try to fix them with your solutions or tell them about how you dealt with the problem – this is God at work in the world.

Before Christie and I went to Haiti as missionaries we received cross-cultural training. An older minister named Walter led the training and shared a story about going to Alaska as a newly ordained minister to work with the Eskimos. He was scared. How, he asked, am I supposed to connect with them? What do we have in common? His Bishop let him fulminate for a while and then asked, “*Do you have a mother?*” “*Why, yes,*” Walter replied. “*Do you think the Eskimo has a mother?*” “*Well, I suppose so.*” “*Then,*” said the Bishop, “*you have something to talk about. Get going.*”

Listening to one another in love – which is the essence of unity – sounds easy, but of course it is the hardest part. Liking is easy enough, as Jonathan Franzen said in his essay in the *New York Times* last Sunday, but loving requires engaging the whole person and giving up yourself. It's costly.

Just try for one day to do the things I've just described. You will see very quickly how sinful you are. You will see very quickly that you need Jesus to pray for you. You will see very quickly, in fact, that you need Jesus to die for you and raise you to a new life of love and grace. You will see very quickly that you need the constant inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That is the only way to unity. As we pray in today's Collect, “do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us.”

Amen.