

May 29, 2022 - 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (Ascension) - Sermon notes

Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21; John 17:20-26

### “That They All May Be One”

Many of us have heard of Ripley’s ‘Believe it or not’. The premise of the articles published under this title was that the reader was supposed to decide whether the account presented was fact or fiction. I am going to tell you something that is true but I think you might wonder if I’m working for Ripley’s. So, here goes. In the 1970’s I learned of an Anglican congregation that was experiencing extraordinary growth. This phenomenon attracted a good deal of attention and people from all over North America traveled to Darien Connecticut to find out how this had happened. By the middle of the 1980’s books had been published describing the situation and one of the observations that astounded me was that in this congregation major decisions were made by consensus and only acted upon when a unanimous agreement was reached. I’ll give that a moment to sink in. This congregation did not move forward on any major decision until the decision making body was in complete agreement. Now, I’ve never been part of such a group but I have experienced a touch of this in person otherwise I wouldn’t have believed it myself but there is a great deal of evidence that it is true. One of the things that makes this concept so strange is the observed phenomenon that I have remarked on from time to time that if you have 6 Anglicans in a room you have up to 12 opinions. As a denomination we aren’t known for unanimity. I remember talking about this congregation in the setting of a small group and was almost laughed at - I could almost see the ‘eye roll’ - probably because the conclusion was that many things would have to change before such an idea would fly locally. I agree.

If it were only this one congregation that I’ve mentioned I would pass it off as an anomaly but in the book we were all assigned to read prior to last year’s Synod I read about the same kind of idea. In her book “How to lead when you don’t know where you are going” Susan Beaumont describes a very similar process when coming to major decisions. And in another book about discernment unanimity is held out as a goal toward which a congregation should work. While I’ve never seen it worked out in person I marvel at the concept and wish it were possible. When I am asked to preach sermons about passages such as John 17:20-26 I find myself wishing that I had a clearer picture of how it might actually work. So, I wonder, have we all given up on the idea of ‘being one - even as the Father and the Son are one’ because we think it could never happen here? I completely understand the desire to come to that conclusion but I believe that we would be cutting ourselves off from some pretty impressive blessings were we to stop working toward this sense of unity among our diversity. The fact that it was part of Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer (as the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John’s Gospel is called) means that it is high on

God's priority for his people to have a kind of unity that would express God's glory to the world. In an attempt to help us look at this idea with a degree of belief that it is possible I wish to draw your attention to a few elements in Jesus' prayer that may help us believe.

First, the unity Jesus prays for is the one he experienced with His Father in heaven. In some real sense Jesus and the Father were held together in a kind of unity that allowed them to retain some distinction. This separate identity has caused a great deal of confusion and has led to the doctrine of the Trinity in order to try to make sense of it but the fact is there was a unity of purpose that did not destroy individuality. Jesus could, and did, say with complete honesty, 'the Father and I are One' while clearly being two separate entities in our eyes. So the unity need not be a physical unity and it certainly is not something that makes the individual disappear. Somehow this unity of which we speak requires the individual to retain its 'personhood' in order to achieve the unity desired. This means that Jesus was praying that his band of disciples operate in the same way that Jesus and his Heavenly Father operated. In order to live in this way a level of humility needs to be in operation so that the individual's desires do not deflect the plan or overall purpose. We can sometimes mimic this with rigid structures and forced obedience but that is not God's way. In God's plan this unity comes about through love. Love for God, love for neighbour, love for self tied together with love for the world. It is God's way of operating that makes this unity possible. It would seem, therefore, that the way for the unity to grow is for me (and you) to get closer to God's way of doing things while not worrying overly about what others are doing. That is what I see in Jesus' life. He worked at being as close to God as possible and sharing the message of love while not allowing the failure of others to follow to deflect his purpose. The unity of God was preserved and an invitation to join was always on offer as a significant part of God's process of bringing about a desired unity in the people of God. What we see in the relationship between Jesus and His Father in heaven shows that such a unity is possible between humanity and God and, therefore, among the human race.

The second thing to notice about the prayer is that Jesus modeled the same kind of behaviour through his interactions with his disciples. Their individuality was allowed to shine while they learned to become one. Jesus warned them about putting themselves forward, taking the higher seat, while demonstrating that no matter how important a person was they needed to be prepared to wash someone else's feet. The humility that was a part of the relationship between Jesus and the Father is at the core of the relationship desired between human beings which has, at its roots, love for God, neighbour, and self. In his well known message about being the Good Shepherd Jesus told his listeners that he desired to have one flock under one shepherd. A single flock made up of a multitude of different sheep but united

in purpose and love.

Finally, this unity for which Jesus prayed would be a marvelous testimony of the power of God to transform the world. Can you imagine if the people of this parish experienced and expressed the unity for which Jesus prays? Wouldn't tongues be wagging and people wondering what had happened? The observation about 6 Anglicans and 12 opinions has sadly been closer to the norm than 6 Anglicans and one purpose but it would seem God would like the second option better.

One of the manifestations of this unity we see expressed in the story of Paul and Silas. Working together as a team of evangelists had landed them in prison on somewhat trumped up charges. The deliverance from demon possession of a woman had interfered with some peoples' business but to say 'they are overturning the world' was a bit much. In any case Paul and Silas could have descended into a spat of blaming one another for getting them into this mess but instead spent their time singing praise songs to the Lord. God honoured that outpouring of unity in these two disciples and as a result an entire household of people came to believe in Jesus the Messiah. This same kind of behaviour has been seen in our era with people who have been falsely accused for political reason spending their time praying and thanking God rather than blaming others. Paul and Silas were used by God in this event as well as many others throughout their ministry. It was not their egos which were in play but the desire on their part to humble themselves for the sake of the work of God through announcing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There are reasons we find such a concept as unity which honours individuality so difficult to believe but that does not make it untrue. The glimpses of God's kingdom that we see through these events of remarkable unity are evidence that it is possible. While total unity may be currently impossible in our circle perhaps there are some things that each of us, as individuals, can do to enhance the level of unity in our lives and in those around us. Perhaps we can all make this a matter of our prayers over the next few weeks as the season of Easter comes to a close and the feast of Pentecost approaches. "May they all be one as you (Father) are in me and I (Jesus) am in you". Believe it or not it is possible.

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