

Father Make Us One

John 17:20-26

June 5, 2011

I.

Sometimes a hypothetical situation can be useful to make a point. Imagine this. You are quietly starting to pray, and through the Holy Spirit you hear a voice in your mind. That voice says, "Thank you for calling your Heavenly Father's house. Your prayer may be monitored for quality assurance. Please select one of the following options.

"Press 1 for prayers of praise. Press 2 for prayers of thanksgiving. Press 3 for prayers of petition. Press 4 for all other prayers." And so you mentally press a number and hear a sweet voice say, "I'm sorry, all our angels are busy helping other sinners. However, your prayers are important to us and will be answered in the order received. Please remain on the line.

"We are open for prayer between 9:00 am and 5:00 pm your time on Monday through Friday, except holidays, as well as Sunday mornings. If you need emergency assistance please contact your local priest or pastor."

That response would be a little discouraging, wouldn't it. If God is too busy for us, what hope is there? But fortunately this all is hypothetical, and we never would hear anything like that when we pray. And that's because of Jesus Christ, which today's Gospel reading makes clear.

Today we heard part of Jesus' most heartfelt prayer in the Bible, offered on the eve of his death, for the unity of the church so that it could show its Christian love in the world.

Some say it is the real Lord's Prayer. That, of course does not diminish the more popular version Jesus taught to his disciples that we will say later this morning. But this was an actual real-time prayer that was a product of Jesus' knowledge of his impending death.

And thus it is no ordinary prayer. It is called Jesus' high priestly prayer because it summarized his teachings for the church he was going to leave behind, and he asked that believers in ages to come would know the fruits of his sacrifice that was about to begin on the cross.

II.

The complete prayer takes up an entire chapter in John's Gospel, and has three parts. Part three is today's reading. In part one Jesus prayed for himself, and in part two for his disciples. In part three today he extended that prayer to all people for all time and in all places who might become believers in him.

As a result, this third part is a deposit in both heaven and the world, with continuing effect for all time, upon which we can draw for strength and guidance.

And the essence of Jesus' prayer is for the unity of existing and future believers, that they all would be one in faith and fellowship. But it was not a prayer for ecclesiastical unity, or unity of church organizations. We know Jesus did not come to found the Episcopal Church, or the Catholic Church, or any other denomination.

Instead, Jesus' purpose was the church universal; one church, in the broad sense, bound together in unity by personal relationships of love for each other and obedience to our Lord. And some experts on end-time things say that Jesus still is waiting for that to become more of a reality before he returns to establish God's kingdom on earth. But, of course, we don't really know.

We do know, however, that throughout his ministry Jesus taught that believers stand alike before God and share equally in God's love. And in today's reading he asked that they know a bond of fellowship by relating to each other and to God in mutual love just as the Father and Son share mutual love. This is the sense in which he asked that we all would be one.

But Jesus also recognized that people and cultures are different. He understood that as the church spread throughout the world, Christians would not all organize their individual communities in the same way, or pray in the same way, or worship God in the same way.

Unfortunately, this has been true in the extreme. The cause of Christian unity has been held back for centuries because a few powerful people loved their own ecclesiastical organizations, their own doctrines, and their own rituals more than they loved each other, or Christ's teachings.

And for many others the existence of all these different denominations with different ideas, competing claims, and complex theological distinctions reaffirms their own doubts. It is proof, at least in their own minds, that the church should not be taken seriously.

And the result has been ineffective witness in the world. Some people claim to be spiritual but want nothing to do with a church organization. That's partially because even though churches might take many steps forward, they also take a few steps back. And those steps back get the public attention. They obscure the real message of Christianity and today's Gospel.

III.

So let's look more closely at that message, and we can start with what Jesus did not say. Jesus did not say that all we have to do is to have some kind of belief in him and his teachings to the exclusion of the church. Jesus did not say that faith is a private thing just between each person alone and God alone. And he did not say that it's OK to keep our faith to ourselves.

Instead, his prayer had two parts. First when he prayed that we all may be one, he meant one together as a community, and not one separately and individually. "Community" is the key word.

Jesus wanted the Christian community to know the fullness of God's love as he had known it. He wanted the Father to love that community of believers in the same way as the Father loved him. And he prayed this abundance of love would create real and meaningful unity within the community notwithstanding other differences.

This set the stage for the second part of the prayer. Just as he first wanted us to get our own houses in order through worship and discipleship together, he then called us to mission and evangelism by praying that we would take this mutual and reciprocal love into the world. In that way, and only in that way, could the world know the real meaning of Christianity.

This is the essence of our faith. Christ was counting on this mutual and reciprocal love to overcome the attempts of Satan to divide the church and weaken the example of our faith. When we are one in God's love, then we are strong in our witness to the world.

IV.

But, as I said earlier, to pray that we all be one does not mean that we all should be the same. Just as people, races, and cultures are different, the ways we worship also can be different.

No one has the franchise on worship styles. The substance is what counts. There is nothing wrong with individual denominations, and localized forms of worship, so long as people don't worship the denomination instead of God. We, as Episcopalians do certain things in our way because it is important or meaningful to us, but others have their own legitimate variations.

And here is a way in which we might consider denominational differences. Imagine, for a moment, that the things the church believes, proclaims, and does could be illustrated by a series of concentric circles, like circles in a target that become increasingly larger, or ripples that form when you throw a stone in the water.

At the very center, the bulls eye or point of impact, are bedrock things that are essential to faith for everyone and cannot be compromised. Then as we go out to the next circle we start to find a few little differences on other matters that don't challenge things at the center. Then as we go further out to the rings beyond that we find even more differences on still other matters.

And the interesting point of this exercise that as we go further and further out from the center, and encounter more and more differences, we also see that those differences have become less and less important and don't conflict with the central principles. They are the fringe issues.

But of course this image of concentric circles does not necessarily explain everything. People still can argue about whether a particular theology or doctrine should be at the center in the bulls eye, or in one of the outer rings. Therein lies part of the problem.

Jesus' prayer today, however, does not allow for those kind of debates. He proclaimed unity of faith and obedience even though he anticipated a diversity of cultures, races and societies. He prayed that our faith and obedience would be based in our love for each other just as he and the Father love each other. This is in the bulls-eye.

V.

So what does it all mean for us? Someone once said that mountain climbers are tied together to keep the sensible ones from turning around and going home. For a different reason, but consistent with the image, the church ties us all together. Spirituality could not survive in the world without the church. There are mountains out there we cannot conquer alone.

And so even though we come from different points of departure, Jesus asks us to share a common life centered in the church, to share a relationship with God through Christ, and to share that relationship in Christ with each other.

And I know these can be glorious and high-sounding words when we are all happy, and don't have to deal with difficult or controversial questions. But at the same time, the words of Jesus' prayer today can help us deal with those questions when they arise.

Most of us, at some time or another, have seen the initials "WWJD," which stand for the question, "What would Jesus do?" Some people think that is a rather unsophisticated approach to religion, but I disagree. That question clearly is appropriate in the context of today's reading.

Jesus prayed that his ministry on earth and on the cross would encompass all people for all time. In the context of those popular initials, it is what Jesus did, and I grant that it might be a seemingly simple message. But it also is enormously profound and far-reaching.

There is no better way to live the two Great Commandments than for humanity to be united as one as we know the Father and Son, who also are one. And as we will hear next week, on Pentecost, that unity of the Father and Son is made known to us through the Holy Spirit.

And if we believe in Christ's teachings and his faith in us, then we know that God is eternally present in us through him. That belief is at the circle in the center, in the bulls eye, and its power will prevail and lead us on our journeys through the differences in the circles that are further out. And on those journeys all we need do is what Jesus would do, love one another. *Amen.*