That the World May Know

John 17:1, 6-9, 20-23

sermon digest May 16, 2010 carolyn dipboye

If you listen closely, you can hear it–a drumbeat that says this is no ordinary moment. Just like the building climax of a novel, we have reached this morning a high moment of drama. Actually, if we have been reading closely, this is nothing new. Like Mark's repetitive use of the word "immediately" in unfolding Jesus' story as a man of action in pursuit of his mission, the Gospel of John opens with the expansive sweep of its Prologue and then begins a steady drumbeat as the Logos, the Word that came from God makes his purposeful stride through history. Far from a victim, this Jesus that John portrays is one who knows where he came from and where he is going. From the beginning and especially at the end, he is one who in unity with the Father is calling the shots, accomplishing his mission, bringing to birth an insistent movement that will purposefully, decisively stride into the future.

So be sure, this morning as we step into the upper room to overhear Jesus' closing moments among his disciples, we have arrived at no ordinary moment. Feel the sense of crisis in the air, but do not mistake it for resignation or desperation. During Holy Week, we often focus upon Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and identify with the agony of Jesus' words, his "sweat . . . drops of blood". John calls upon us to overhear another prayer–the prayer Jesus prays at the end of his extended final instruction at the last supper. It is a moment of high intensity, but it is not a moment focused upon the anguish of Jesus before the cross. It is a moment focused upon Jesus' deep concern for this initial group of believers and for those yet to believe. It is a moment of concern for his body, the church that must carry forward his work.

"I ask," Jesus prays to the Father, "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" (17:20-21).

If we can identify with the intensity of Jesus' prayer at Gethsamene, how much more should we identify with the intensity of his prayer for the church? What difference would it make if we took his prayer as the beginning point for who we are and what we are to become? What difference would it make if we reminded ourselves daily, "We are the community for whom Jesus prays?"

The church's unity is rooted in the person of Christ. Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one" is often cited as the rationale for ecumenism. If we would grasp the true significance of the prayer, however, we must look beyond simplistic prescriptions to "play nice" with one another. Too often playing nice is reduced to not believing anything very deeply and just going with the flow. More than concern for external appearances or timidity that we might actually offend someone, the church's unity resides in its bedrock commitment to the God we know in Christ.

Interpreters have noted the peculiar nature of the Gospel of John as a *Christology* concerned to get at the meaning of just who the Christ was and what he means for the church and all humanity. As he comes to the end of Jesus' time among the disciples, John's rendition of Jesus' prayer for the unity of his church is equally rooted in the identity of the Christ. Seeking to understand John's concern here, interpreters have sought to uncover what was going on in John's church. Identifying the tensions that beset the church as it was increasingly distanced from the synagogue and had to hammer out its own separate identity, interpreters have identified six distinguishable parties within the church. What, John must have been asking himself, held them together?

John does not prescribe certain structures. He does not lay out a seven step program for achieving unity. Nor does he place on Jesus' lips a request that God silence all questions or make his flock agree on everything. The oneness of the church is not a program for human achievement. It is first and it is foremost and it is only putting at center stage response to the God in Christ. "The focus, as Mark Appold puts it, "is on Jesus. There are no intermediaries" [*Currents in Theology & Mission* (1978), 370].

The unity of the church is expressed in mission. The oneness for which Christ prays, however, is not merely a good feeling. It does not exist invisibly as a matter of "faith" or by assent to a set of propositions. Just as John insists that Jesus enfleshed the eternal Logos of God, so his church's unity must be lived out in the visible and material world. Unlike Matthew, John's Gospel has no Great Commission, but it vibrates with a thoroughgoing conviction that the church is sent into the world just as Jesus himself was sent into the world. Far from a warm cozy feeling to keep it warm, the church's oneness is "that the world may believe".

Thomas Troeger describes the temptation that the earliest Christians had in common with us: "How good it would feel to retreat into their own group, to recall the stories of Jesus, to sense his presence in their meals of bread and wine, to enjoy each other's supportive fellowship, and no longer to have to defend their beliefs and practices in a hostile world." Troeger notes our contemporary exhaustion with the world's ceaseless violence and corruption, and our recurring sense of despair at our seeming inability to make a difference. "Christ's presence that will allow us to live vitally and faithfully in the world, not owned by it, but fully engaged with its needs and wounds and energized by the truth of God's word" [Quoted by Kate Huey, "Guided in Prayer," *Weekly Seeds,* iucc.org, 2009].

Walter Wink transliterates Jesus' prayer to read, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. God, deliver them from misunderstanding me as preaching heaven when they die! Theirs is not a flight to the world beyond, but the creation of a new world in the shell of the old" ["The Truthteller," *Christian*

Century, May 4, 1994].

The modern ecumenical movement had its beginnings on the mission field at the turn of the last century. Faced with the confusion over the church's divisions that gripped the peoples to whom they sought to bear witness, denominational entities began to recognize a reality binding them to one another that far exceeded their differences: service in the name of the church's one Lord.

The recently deceased Ralph Shotwell, former executive director of the International Council of Community Churches, sadly called attention to the contradictory witness born of the church's division. On the site within the walled city of Jerusalem where tradition says Jesus died and was buried, there now stands the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The building is used by Catholic, Orthodox, and Coptic Christians, each group occupying a separated section. Over the years, the groups have fought so fiercely among themselves over who would possess the key and other insignificant matters that the civil authorities decreed that someone in successive generations of a Moslem family would possess the key. "To this very day," Shotwell observed, "as any one of these Christians wants entrance to this place of worship, work, and witness, the key has to be secured from a Moslem.

"Not only is this shameful," Shotwell decried, "it is sinful!"

> Jesus prayed that his followers be united, and on this very site where tradition says this same Jesus suffered and died for the sake of this and other teachings there is this kind of disunity. Disunity as it exists elsewhere in Christendom and anywhere among God-centered world religions or anywhere in the world family, God's one family, is sinful!" [*Inclusive Truths for Inclusive Times,* The Church Press, 1987, p. 47].

Within the church we gather around the Lord's Table to receive the bread and cup, the sacramental gifts of Christ's body and blood. We go out into the world to become the body of Christ–blessed, broken, and shared for the sake of the world.

Our covenant says it well: "We will be an ecumenical church, joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God's children." So may we live.