

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 29, 2022

Completely One

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Another mass shooting. Conflict and divisiveness infest our politics. War in Ukraine. Continued conflict in Yemen and Palestine. Overlooked violence in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Somalia. The biggest refugee crisis in 80 years. Economic downturn. Massive income inequality. Predicted famines. Climate change leading to a climate crisis. Clergy misconduct and church scandals... That's a long list of reasons to despair. It's also a whole lot of evidence that we are far away from the world knowing the unity, community, and divine love that Christ prays for in the Gospel text for today.

Richard Rohr suggests that the reason we have failed so miserably at pursuing the kingdom of God, the unity that Christ is pointing his followers towards, is because we have forgotten what unity entails. In his book, "Grace in Action" he writes "That kingdom reigns not just when the oppressed are liberated but even more when the oppressors are liberated from their insecurities and fears. **It seems we are essentially involved in one another's conversion** to justice and charity. We cannot hate, compete, compare, or dominate one another and still expect the new community of Christ to unfold. Our assurance that this is the Gospel is that God in Christ does none of these things to us"¹ (*emphasis mine*).

I am increasingly of the opinion that what Christ is praying in this prayer for us, and what Rohr is trying to point out in that quote, is that we are intimately bound up in one another and in God. Conversion, salvation, redemption, wholeness, unity, growth, whatever you want to call it, is simply not possible outside of community and relationship. And when we cannot see that, we act in ways that hurt one another, and ourselves. The end result being the terrible state that humanity finds itself in currently. The terrible state that humanity has been in for most, if not all, of its existence.

¹ Rohr, Richard. "When Charity Is Not Love." Essay. In *Grace in Action*, page 5. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1994.

Over two thousand years ago Christ prayed that we might be one the way that he and God are one. How's that been going for us? Not well, right? And that is because we have become adept at staying blind to the basic reality that humanity is bound up together. I'd go even further and say that it's not just humanity, but all life is bound up together in the source of life, God. So not only do our actions harm one another and ourselves, we harm creation too, we harm **all** life.

Two thousand years since Christ came to earth to teach us this fundamental aspect of reality and we still struggle to learn it and believe it. Over the centuries some have seemed to understand it, but we're awfully good at ignoring or even attacking them. Gandhi understood this teaching, as did the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, and others who worked for justice and peace for all. How did the world respond to those teachers? Murdered, every one of them. The world hates the message that our lives are bound up in one another's.

Of all the great religions and philosophies since Christ I think perhaps Buddhism has come the furthest in teaching this to people. One of the key concepts in Buddhism is that of *dharma*, which is often described as "reality as-it-is." The practice of Buddhism then, is often understood to be learning to see things as they are...another way of saying mindfulness. And seeing reality as it is means seeing that all life within reality is interconnected. Once we learn to see this interconnectedness, we can become mindful of it. Once we become mindful of it, we can start to live in ways that acknowledge and express it.

This awareness of our interconnectedness leads to compassion, grace, and love. It is also the cornerstone of justice, charity, and peace. A greater awareness of how we are one is an awareness of the kingdom of God. Christ is praying that we may become "completely one."² But I tend to think that in God, given *imago dei* (that is the teaching that humanity has been made in God's image), we are **already** one. It's just that we do not live as though that were true. We do not seem to naturally understand this part of our reality. Perhaps this is what Christ means when he explains that "the world does not know"³ God. We do not know unity, interconnectedness, oneness; and therefore we do not **truly** know God.

² John 17:23b (NRSV)

³ John 17:25a (NRSV)

All of the reasons we have to lament that I listed off at the start of this sermon are manifestations of our unwillingness to acknowledge the simple reality that we are all interconnected. We are one in God's image, one in God's gaze, one in God's heart. When we live out of our own wants and desires, when we act, speak, and think selfishly; we deny the reality of our interconnectedness. We deny the reality of the world around us. We deny the love of God for all.

This prayer of Christ, which is prayed not just for his disciples, but also for us (the opening verse of the Gospel reading illustrates this), is a prayer for an awareness of reality as-it-is. Christ and God are one. And if we were better at being who God made us to be, then we would be one with God in Christ too. But we're lousy at being who God made us to be, in part because we do not recognize that a fundamental part of who God made us, and all of humanity to be, is being bound up, one with one another.

And unfortunately, we Americans in particular, are not great at community and unity. Our overemphasis on individualism makes it very difficult to be aware of our interconnectedness. Our overemphasis on our freedoms and rights, often at the expense of emphasizing our responsibilities, makes it nearly impossible to proclaim that we absolutely **need** one another. And that when one part of the body of humanity is harmed, the entire body of humanity is harmed too.

Christ proclaimed unity with God to be the goal of the Way of Christ. And unity with God is only fully realized when we understand that our unity with one another is one expression of our unity with God. Now, I am not arguing for homogeneity. God created us as diverse and varied peoples. And I believe that we find numerous blessings in that diversity of opinion, thought, and experience. But Christ shows us that we can pursue unity even as we celebrate diversity. This Way of Christ, balancing diversity and unity, can only be achieved if we hold the love of God as central to our unity.

We can love one another, even as we do not always agree with one another. What a concept! But it is only possible if we love and worship God above loving and worshipping the things that make us different. We can be united in God when we are willing to say that the love of God is more important than the ways in which we choose to divide ourselves. When we can truly see the face of Christ in our neighbors, even the neighbors we cannot stand, then we can know the unity of God.

After all, what is at the heart of our divisions? The force that most gets in the way of our love and unity? Fear. Fear of the other, fear of the different, fear of losing something...power, or influence, or whatever. And what does Christ teach us about fear? In numerous ways, Christ teaches that faith in God's love, belief in God's goodness, casts out our fear. Knowing that we are loved...no matter what. Knowing that there is nowhere we can go that God does not go with us (even death!). This knowledge can free us from fear. And that is the first step in being united in God and being made completely one. Or realizing that we are already made completely one.

Do not be afraid my siblings in Christ. Though the world rages around us and forces seek to divide us. We know that there is a power greater than fear, greater than shame, greater than all the might of all the armies of the world...love. The unconditional, unifying love of God for all of humanity, for all life, for the cosmos. And if we can rest in that love we can know the complete oneness that God in Christ desires for us. The oneness that we were made to know and share in.

Amen.