

Easter VII A, May 21, 2023

"You Belong Here"

ST. THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ST. PETERSBURG, FL

Acts 1: 6-14 • Psalm 68: 1-10, 33-36 • 1 Peter 4: 12-14; 5: 6-11 • John 17: 1-11



It's fitting that this is the Gospel for my first opportunity to preach since returning from the National Workshop on Christian Unity in Milwaukee, because the motto of the National Workshop has long been, "so that they may be one, as we are one." It's a fitting verse for a group whose goal is Christian Unity and so I'd like to share with you a particular learning I gleaned from last week. Maya Angelou once said, and some of you will no doubt have heard this before, *"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."* This was shared with us by the Rev. Jay Wittmeyer, Executive Director of the Lombard Mennonite Center for Peace. Over two days he would offer some of the most important teachings I've heard in recent memory. It may, at first, not seem like this has much to do with church or Christian Unity, but trust, it very much does.

He taught us that in an age of increasing social isolation (for example, more friendships meted out online than in person, more people working from home, and more people who are so overscheduled that they have no time for social gatherings of any kind), how we meet and why we meet together matters more than ever. Gatherings need to be people-centric, focusing less on routine and more on the distinctiveness of people. I remember a time when I was a boy and I had to hang out at church for a long time even after coffee hour was over because my Dad was the parish treasurer and that was when he had to prepare and sign the checks. So, there I was, fooling around in the parish hall, when this older parishioner couple came over to me. They were the only ones there besides myself and I recognized him as having been a magician at a recent parish event, but otherwise I didn't know them. They said to me, "We wanted to tell you that we're going home now and so you are the last person we'll see at church today, which makes you very special to us. Have a great Sunday!" I can't remember their names. But what I can remember is how warm that remark made me feel, even thirty plus years later.

Rev. Wittmeyer went on to discuss how our Surgeon General recently commented that, *“Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health. Our relationships are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight – one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled, and more productive lives. Given the significant health consequences of loneliness and isolation, we must prioritize building social connection the same way we have prioritized other critical public health issues such as tobacco, obesity, and substance use disorders.”*

It may strike you as odd that the surgeon general is making this comment, but the health risks to social isolation are very well documented. So, what does this have to do with church and unity? Everything! If we are not connected to one another even at our church, how can we expect that we can live into Jesus’ prayer that we be one, as he and the Father are one?

We’re very good here, and at most Episcopal churches, at welcoming the newcomer. What we need to keep practicing is welcoming them the second, third, fourth time they come back. While your experience on the second time you see someone new at church might be, “Oh that’s great, they came back, but I don’t need to talk to them because I talked to them

last week,” their experience of that is “Everyone here was so friendly last week, I wonder what happened?” Or even worse, “I wonder what I did?”

Be conscious of not just talking with your friends on Sunday morning, but with everyone you see. Maybe try telling someone you see here today why they are special to you. This can be an easy step for us to take in order to move towards becoming one as Jesus and the Father are one. Hear me, Christians: the church must become less clique-ish and more a place of true and deeply felt belonging, for everyone! Jesus showed us this way. We can be a center of belonging, meaning-making, and Christian growth. But we have to work at it. We have to recognize, especially when we come to church, that, to quote C.S. Lewis, *“Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”* If you need further convincing of that, every person you pass on your way out those doors who also took communion is a walking, living, breathing, sacred vessel of the Blessed Sacrament as much as the chalice and paten were at the Altar.

When we recognize that, we can break the cycle of disunity among ourselves. We can make a potentially life-saving difference for one of our neighbors. Studies show those who feel lonely or socially isolated *“are more likely to have negative perceptions of social situations and to experience social threat. This can lead to a self-reinforcing cycle of social isolation and loneliness.”* You can easily see how that cycle works. You may even feel it yourself, or know those who do. It is part of our ethos as Christians to protect each other from this. Jesus prayed, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

So, here’s some easy things you can try. When you arrive at church on Sunday morning next week, pick a pew that has someone else in it already and ask if you can join them. Bonus points if it’s someone you don’t know! At the Peace, and we’ll do this today, we’ll have a general amnesty Sunday: introduce yourself by name to everyone, whether you’ve never met them before or you’ve been friends for years. This guards against the social awkwardness of having seen someone for years but never known their name. Oh, and while I’m at it, wear your name tag! At coffee hour, have a meaningful conversation with someone you don’t know well.

If you feel so inclined, see if they'd like to join you for breakfast or brunch sometime. When you come to Supper, Song, and Prayer, our weekly pot luck supper on Wednesdays (you are coming this week, right?), go ahead and greet your buddies, but then say you're going to sit over at that table because you don't know them yet. This kind of welcoming promotes feelings of social belonging and gives greater meaning and purpose to what we do each week here at St. Thomas by centering the God-given dignity of every human being. And by the way, it's one of the big differences between coming to church or watching it online. When we offer this kind of welcome and sense of belonging to one another we strengthen our social fabric and bolster it against times when, due to political or cultural strife, it can be strained. We can even unwittingly be improving our neighbor's mental and physical health. But most of all, we are doing our part to live into Jesus' prayer that we may be unified, that we may be one and he and the Father are one. So bless you in this holy work and know that you, yes even you, belong here.

Amen.