

Easter VII, Year C - May 29, 2022

“Comm[union]: May They Be One”

ST. THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ST. PETERSBURG, FL

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



Jesus' last prayer, in John's gospel, before he was crucified is called the high priestly prayer and it's from that prayer that today's Gospel lesson is drawn. It's a difficult one to grasp, especially when only a slice of it is excised for a reading in worship. But this portion of it at least does have an emphasis. Jesus could have prayed many things for his final prayer. He could have spoken about power, and where it really lies. He could have mentioned abiding care for the poor or the hungry. He could have prayed about love. Instead, he prayed for unity. And so, this will be a sermon about unity in three movements.

For nearly one thousand years the church has been fractured. I don't mean to suggest that for the first thousand years of Christianity it was perfect or without confusion or discord, because it wasn't. Human nature dictates that we have conflict; it is a consequence of the Fall. But in 1054 conflict in the church boiled over and a break occurred between East and

West. Five hundred years after that another fracturing happened, which we now call the Reformation. Smaller fractures occurred each century thereafter until today. Many of these fractures had good reasons and represented right causes, but they were still fractures in the Body of Christ. As Christ prayed that all may be one in the high priestly prayer, we have spent a millennia at least cracking that vision. This is why when, a few years ago, Christians marked the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, the Lutheran Church and the Roman Catholic Church issued a joint ecumenical statement to the world imploring churches to not hold “celebrations” of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, but instead to commemorate it. No matter how right you may believe the Reformation to have been, it still split the Body of Christ, and that is not a cause for celebration, but one for sober reflection.

For over a decade now I have served as the Ecumenical Officer for this diocese and for another. One of my jobs in that role is to attend the National Workshop on Christian Unity. At that workshop, I have attended many worship services across the liturgical and denominational spectrum, and they have been wonderful. But every year there is a part of this

workshop that breaks my heart. During any non-Roman Catholic service, at the time of Communion, the Roman Catholics present remain seated during the administration of the Sacrament. Instead of receiving, they pray for the unity of the Church. Likewise, during the Roman Catholic Eucharist services, those of us who are not Roman Catholic do not receive the Sacrament but remain in our seats to pray for the unity of the Church. My heart breaks, every time. Even at that level of ecumenical dialogue, even among individuals who have walked together in faith across the denominational divide for decades, there is a fracture in the Body of Christ. Perhaps the fracture can begin being repaired at your level, person to person, heart to heart. Perhaps you will lead us.

Jesus prayed, "I ask 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." And we are not, not yet.

The second movement doesn't take us back as far, but only four hundred years to the seventeenth century. Dutch painting master Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn ("van rain") painted a lot of pictures of Jesus. One of his early painting called "Christ and the Woman Taken in

Adultery” portrays a Jesus almost exactly as you might picture him if you were asked to picture the Jesus that most frequently appears in European Renaissance art: long flowing blond hair, fair skin, heavy beard, and generally a Caucasian/European appearance. There’s actually good reason for this. Rembrandt was following the artistic conventions not only of his day but of what he believed to be an authentic and authoritative description of our Savior and Lord.

According to legend, in Jesus’ lifetime a letter had been sent to the Roman Senate by a man named Publius Lentulus which contained a physical description of Jesus. It said, “His hair is the color of ripe hazelnut, parted on top in the manner of the Nazarites, and falling straight to the ears but curling further below, with blonde highlights and fanning off his shoulders. He has a fair forehead and no wrinkles or marks on his face, his cheeks are tinged with pink. . . . In sum, he is the most beautiful of all mortals.” This letter surfaced in the fifteenth century and is, most serious scholars agree, at best, apocryphal, and at worst, downright fraudulent. Despite that, it was the description of Jesus that artists between the years

1460 or thereabouts and 1648 or so followed and thought they were doing right.

Enter Rembrandt. Wanting to explore a different angle, after already painting Jesus in this aforementioned manner several times, he decided that he wanted to paint the face of Christ from life. The only problem with that is obvious – no Jesus, at least not physically. But, Rembrandt reasoned (it being on the cusp of the Age of such things), he lived in the Jewish Quarter of Amsterdam and wasn't Jesus, well, Jewish? So he asked a Jewish man in his neighborhood if he would sit to be painted, and the man agreed. You can see that man right there on the cover of your bulletin. This ignited a minor furor. First of all, Rembrandt was deigning to buck tradition and not show Jesus as a Greek god like figure, but rather with a much more human appearance, fraught with emotion. Secondly, he chose a Jew as his model. This simply would not stand. But, as we reflect on the high priestly prayer of Jesus that we read in today's Gospel, perhaps we should think about how Jesus knew nothing of our current situation of denominationalism. But what he did know, or at least could suspect, was that there would be a divide between his followers and their fellow Jews. A

divide that would ultimately lead to blood shed in the name of his precious blood. Jesus prayed, "I ask 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." And we are not, not yet.

The third movement takes us back to the beginning. Not to the Garden of Gethsemane. Before that. Not to the stable at Bethlehem. Before that. Well before that. Before Saul chased David across the countryside. Before Moses led the Hebrew captives out of Egypt, before even Joseph played his dirty trick on his brothers. Before even Jacob and Rachael, before even Isaac and Rebekah, before even Sarah laughed. Back to the beginning, before there was time. On the sixth day, "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'" Back to that original moment in time when God, in unity with God's self, three in one and one in three, breathed life into flesh and gave it dominion over all the earth, to name and to bless.

In that moment, God was in perfect union and we were in perfect communion with God. It has not ever been so again since the Fall. Perhaps,

then, perhaps what Jesus meant when he prayed, “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,” was that he prayed for us, humanity, to be in perfect communion with God in unity once again. What a beautiful prayer that is! What a beautiful thought that plants in my soul. We may not have gotten there yet, but we sometimes draw close to it, as we will in just a moment, when we receive the Sacrament of Christ’s body and blood. When we take Christ’s body and blood into our body and blood, we get a taste of that union through communion, a fleeting sense, perhaps, of God’s unity in the midst of our community. Today, make Jesus’ prayer your prayer. Let those words, *may we be one*, cross your lips when you receive the Sacrament. Then go, live it, breathe it. Unity in community. Strengthened by communion in union.

Amen.