

SERMON  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
May 16, 2010

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

John 17:20-26

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

A man was shipwrecked on a deserted island for several years. When he was finally rescued, those who found him were amazed by his survival skills. He had even constructed several buildings on the island, which included two churches. This puzzled the rescuers.

They asked him why he had built two churches since he was the only one on the island. The man answered pointing, “That’s the one I pray in, and that’s the one I wouldn’t step foot in!”

In today’s Gospel story Jesus offers a prayer. It is a final prayer before he begins his journey to the cross. And in this prayer, Jesus prays for his disciples. He prays that they may become one, as he and the Father are one.

Think about this for a moment. Of all of the things that Jesus could have prayed for before his arrest and crucifixion. He could have prayed for his own strength. He could have prayed that his followers would not abandon him.

But instead, his prayers are dominated by a single thought – the unity of his disciples. This is the “we” of faith that Jesus is addressing.

You see, in every faith journey, there is the “I”, the “you”, and the “we”. First, let’s look at the “I”. The “I” of faith is what the individual believer experiences in his or her relationship with God. This is the part of faith that sings in the first person; “*I Want Jesus to Walk with Me...*” “*My Faith Looks Up to Thee...*” “*I Know that My Redeemer Lives...*”

Or some more contemporary songs include; “*Jesus Loves Me, This I Know...*” “*Lord, I Lift your Name on High...*” “*My Jesus, My Savior...*” This form of prayer speaks about God in a very personal way.

Now this is not an inherently bad thing, of course. The Psalms are filled with first-person faith talk, and most Christians find this part of prayer vital to their relationship with God.

However, we bear a responsibility to remind ourselves that faith doesn’t end with “I” or “me”. In fact, I would argue that an isolated Christian is not a Christian. The notion of community is so fundamental to following Jesus that one simply can’t live as a Christian without experiencing the faith of other believers. This is where the “you” of faith comes in.

For every Christian there are moments of disillusion. You know, those times in which the focus on our personal relationship with God is disrupted by those pesky other believers out there who seem to be doing and saying something different.

It’s the awkward silence in Sunday school after someone speaks up in the middle of a discussion and says, “I don’t see it that way at all.” It’s the person in the pew behind you who seemingly disagrees with everything you say. It’s the split congregational vote that polarizes a very important decision in the life of the church. Suddenly you see two congregations in one church.

The sad truth is that we live in a world that is increasingly divided. We live in a world of different religions, different cultures, different races, and different nations.

We have different ideals, different opinions, and different thoughts on how things are to be done. Even in our own country, we separate ourselves into groups of liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, those who have it right, and those who have it wrong.

It is a painful thing to be a part of, and it becomes even more painful when the division and separation is done in the name of God. In the name of God, people attack and murder. In the name of God, people cast aside or ignore those who are not like them. In the name of God, people destroy each other and blame each other.

A few years ago, someone scribbled a chilling message on the side of a building in Washington, D.C. It read, “Dear God, please save us from the people who believe in you.”

So how do we live together? How do we worship together? How do we get from “I” and “you” to “we”; the oneness that Jesus was praying for?

It helps, I think, to understand that the unity for which Jesus asks is not based on who we are, but on who God is. First of all, that God is one with Jesus Christ, and second, that God loves God’s people in the same way that God loves Jesus.

Therefore, the unity for which Jesus prays is not dependent upon our ability to overcome division, but rather upon God’s constant love for us in spite of our divisions. There lies the “we” of faith.

This doesn’t mean that we shall simply be content with our division, however. Rather, wherever there is division, discord, or disunity, the all-encompassing love of God is at work. It is forever wearing away the walls that separate us, like waves ceaselessly wearing away the rocks on the ocean’s coastline.

Certainly there will be times when our differences get the best of us, and suddenly we behave like adversaries rather than brothers or sisters in Christ. But then there are also times when the very thing that draws us together, God's love for each and every one of us, overrides our tendency to divide and separate.

And we find ourselves worshiping together, praying together, singing together, and serving together. Ideally, we are reminded of this every Sunday morning.

If you think about it, Sundays really are crazy days. It's been said that you can choose your friends, but you cannot choose your family. That goes for your church family as well. When Sunday morning rolls around we have no control over who we'll be sharing the pew with. When we sing the hymns, we have no say in who sings along.

There are old people and young people, happy people and sad people, conservative people and liberal people, gay people and straight people, married people and unmarried people, wealthy people and not so wealthy people, white people, brown people and black people, children from different schools, parents from different neighborhoods, all kinds of people from different walks of life.

They all come here together on Sundays – they volunteer to be here. No one's making them come (some of you kids might disagree with me on that one). They come here and gather around an area called a sanctuary – a place of peace and safety, a place we can call home.

I once heard some say; “Home is where they have to take you in.” Sounds like the church to me. No matter where you've been, or what you've done, no matter where you live or how you voted, no matter how sick you are or what you look like, you are welcome in this family.

So, on Sundays, we end up with a very interesting mix of people, people who really shouldn't get along. Indeed we perhaps look down the pew toward the end of the row and wonder how that person got in here in the first place.

But you know, when we come together to worship, we come together as God knows us, with all of our flaws and differences. And by some miracle, we sing, we listen, and we pray as one.

I would like to close with a story that is one of those that is fictitious, but not too far from the truth. I think you know the kind I am talking about.

"Let me have your attention please," says a man standing up front as he bangs his gavel on the podium. "Let me welcome you to this national convention of Christians representing people from all denominations across the country," he says with a smile.

"As you know, our purpose in these next three days is to find some common ground, to draft a confession of faith for the next decade, with which we can all agree."

"So let's begin. Each of you should have received a large card – red on one side, green on the other. As I read the following statements and ask for a vote, I would ask that you show the green side of the card if you agree, and the red side if you disagree. Then we'll go on to the next statement."

"The first statement from our panel is this: 'Jesus was born of a virgin,' agree or disagree."

The camera slowly pans a sea of red and green cards, just about evenly divided. The moderator nervously chuckles and says, "Well, ah... It looks like a tie," let's go on to the next statement and see if we can do any better."

But before he can say another word, an argument breaks out on the convention floor. News cameras converge on the scene as one of the delegates shouts at another. “If you don’t believe Jesus was born of a virgin, then you don’t belong in this meeting!” He then grabs the other man’s card and sends it sailing across the room like a Frisbee.

Soon, everyone is grabbing cards and throwing them across the room. The convention goes then begin to yell at one another and start pushing each other.

There were even some punches thrown, according to observers. Cameras flash like fireworks as reporters scramble to get all of the action on film.

The next morning’s newspaper carries this headline: *Christian Convention Erupts in Violence: Delegates Disagree on Virgin Birth.*

In a downtown café, a truck driver points to the picture as a waitress fills his coffee cup. “Will ya look at that? Ain’t that the biggest crock you’ve ever seen? And my mother-in-law wonders why I don’t go to church!”

Three days later, the convention hall is in a shambles. Folding chairs are overturned and trash fills the aisles. The delegates are looking sullen, many of them with bandaged heads and arms in slings. The moderator steps cautiously to the podium and announces in a tired voice, “We will close our, um... meeting with communion. The ushers will direct you.”

Soon, a retired old pastor gets up slowly from his chair. He shuffles to his place behind the altar and invokes the ancient formula; “On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples saying ‘Take and eat, this is my body, broken for you.’”

And then he stops, as if he has forgotten what to say next. For several minutes he stands in that deafening silence, staring at the broken loaf in his hands.

Then from somewhere in front of him, a young woman whispers, “the body of Christ was broken for me.” The man beside her hears it and whispers, “The body of Christ was broken for me.”

Then it ripples across the congregation like a breeze, until every voice in that room is whispering in unison; “The body of Christ was broken for us!” “The body of Christ was broken for us!” Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.  
Amen.