

7 Easter, Yr. C

May 8, 2016

St. Luke's

Acts 16:16-34, Rev. 22:12-14, John 17:20-26

As you know, yesterday a number of us went to St. Anne's in DePere to attend the Engaging One Another Across Difference conference. As the day wore on and we discussed not only the many ways in which the fear of difference traps us and blocks our understanding of one another, but also the reasons for that which include biological as well as linguistic and cultural programming, I couldn't help but think that the timing of the Gospel we heard this morning was really relevant. Because what ties these scriptures, which at first glance seem pretty disparate, together is the theme of oneness, unity in love.

That's spelled out explicitly in the reading from John, part of what's called the High Priestly prayer because Jesus is praying - for the disciples present with him at that time, but also for all who would come after them. He prays that "they all may be one." He goes on to try to clarify what he means by saying just as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you and they are in us... It's a little confusing reading but I think a good visual image is one found later in John, the picture of the vine and branches - all connected and all getting life from the same source. But this isn't just any old unity; instead it's unity in love. And it has a purpose, which is to witness to God's love and to authenticate Christ's message - "so that the world will know, Father, that you have sent me and that you have loved them," Jesus says. The unity Jesus' followers are supposed to have isn't about doctrine, or organization or politics - rather it's unity that comes from and reflects God's love. I don't think you'll be surprised to hear me say that we haven't always done the greatest job with this. John Chrysostom, writing in the earliest years of the church said that quarreling disciples led to non-Christians holding the opinion that they couldn't possibly be followers of any god of peace, given their behavior. Jesus' followers have often been tempted to tear each other apart over theological formulations - seemingly concerned about outdoing each other in the proper articulation of what they believed rather than in how deeply and widely they could love. How different the history of Christianity would be if the competition would have been around outdoing one another in loving!

Oneness and unity sound easy in the John reading, but I think we all have an idea of how hard it really is. All we have to do these days is listen to the news in this country. We don't have to wring our hands over Syria, or Iraq, or Latin America. There's plenty of angst to be had here right under our noses - when the fear of the "other" is being exploited for political gain, and the demons of racism and bigotry that we thought we had left behind us have once again raised their ugly heads. Oneness in love seems an impossible dream. But both scientists and spiritual writers tell us that we have it backwards: the dream is that we are separate - we need to wake from that dream and come to see our inclusion in the Body of Christ - our unity. Thomas Merton has a powerful essay on this, which he entitled "The Body of Broken Bones." The goal, he reminds us, is for us all to be united in love, to recognize that every human being has the same nature, the same needs, and is made in the image of God. But the reality, he also reminds us, is quite otherwise - the ongoing temptation is to treat the other as an object to be used and manipulated for my own ends and desires, thinking that I alone am the human being

here; everyone else is something lesser, an animal or a piece of furniture, here for my convenience and my use. Before we look at the Acts reading, this is a good place to say that parenthood and, especially today, motherhood, is the most common way we learn to love beyond ourselves. Two tributes to moms here – the first from a minister who said that his mother was the person who practiced what he preached and the second from a little boy on the telephone saying that Mom was in the hospital so “the twins and Roxie and Billy and Sally and the dog and me and Dad are home alone.” (From the Saturday Evening Post)

Parents notwithstanding, there’s always the temptation to self-interest, and treating the other as something less. Perhaps that sounds a little strong. But look at the Acts reading. Great story. But when you read it more closely, all kinds of questions arise. On the surface, it sounds like yet another miracle for the early church – defeating the powers that be, getting new converts. But the whole story can also be read as a meditation on freedom and imprisonment.

Start with the slave girl. In ancient times, insanity was considered a gift from the gods. The thought was that because the person had no mind of their own, they could be used by the gods as a channel for the gods’ messages; hence her ability to tell fortunes. She’s clearly not free. The text says that she goes around following Paul and Silas shouting, interestingly, that THEY are also slaves, slaves of the most high God. Apparently this went on for some time until Paul, the text tells us, becomes really annoyed, turns around, and casts out the spirit, thus both curing the girl, and freeing her from this illness. But then nothing else is said about her – what happens to a former slave girl who has lost her usefulness to her owners: nothing good, we can bet. Paul seems totally unconcerned about the girl or her enslavement. I don’t think it’s going too far to say that in the culture of patriarchy in which this was occurring, Paul probably never even thought about her. One does wonder why, however. Because Paul was the person who was breaking down the walls between Jews and Gentiles, representing a church that said there was no separation; slave/free, Jew/Gentile; man/woman. Then the story goes on to tell us that the owners, really irritated at this loss of a source of income (remember the comment about using someone as an object?) manage to have Paul and Silas arrested as trouble-makers. Now they are imprisoned, or at least their bodies are, because the text tells us not only that they were praying and singing hymns, but that, when the earthquake destroyed the prison walls, allowing for physical escape, they stayed there. Did they stay because they knew the Roman law required a jailor who lost his prisoners to suffer the fate they would have suffered was about to kill himself? Presumably. So here we see an example of the jailor, who would be the one imprisoning people, being himself imprisoned by the custom and law of the time and Paul and Silas, physically imprisoned but spiritually free.

We don’t often think of freedom in terms of our spiritual lives. But we should – not the kind of freedom that means that we’re free to do whatever we want, or to live without constraints, which is often what we think of first when we think of freedom. But rather, freedom in the sense that Jesus was free. Someone once said that people could look at Jesus and see God – because he was a totally free person. Free from all the stuff that keeps us (and even Paul in today’s reading) tied in knots. Think of all those things: what would it be like to live free from anxiety, or fear, or guilt, or resentment, or anger, or depression, or despair, or oppression, or addiction, or emptiness. What would a life like that look like? Well, first of all, it would look like

Jesus' life. Insofar as we are living in God's image, we are called to strive for that kind of freedom for ourselves and for others. All the stuff of difference and oppression: hierarchies, inequalities, corruptions of power, exploitation of the weak, enslavement of people – all of that is against God's will. And, also insofar as we are in God's image, we are meant to be free agents, free, as Augustine said, always to choose the good, free to respond to God's invitation to each of us to become partners in the work of creation. How hard this is, because so many things pull us in the other direction – towards self-centeredness, and separateness, away from love and unity. One of the rather disheartening pieces of information at yesterday's conference is that part of our reaction to difference is biologically rooted – partly in the survival mechanisms rooted in the brain stem which often signal that difference is to be feared and partly in the fact that our brains try to take the course of least resistance, thereby saving energy and operating more efficiently, and doing that by putting people and events into categories, most often without examination of whether those categories are valid.

But there are always stories of people who have been able to get past difference and to recognize and live the oneness that Jesus is praying for. One such story is about the father of Daniel Pearl. Remember him? The journalist for the Wall Street Journal who was kidnapped in Pakistan and then beheaded on camera by his captors? His father responded by starting a foundation dedicated to reconciliation. Among its projects are monies for young Pakistani journalists to come to America to study and learn something of our culture in hopes of lessening their alienation. He refused to be imprisoned by a reaction of hatred and when asked about it, said, "If I were to fight hate with hate, I would only create more hate. Therefore I fight it with love. That is my tribute to my son's memory." (*To Heal a Fractured World*, Sacks) That's the kind of reaction that will bring us to the kingdom sketched in Revelation. But it's not easy. The easy and seemingly more natural reaction is one of revenge and self-protection. Maybe that's why this section of John has Jesus praying for his followers; he knew we'd need at the help we could get!

So we have Jesus praying for us and we also have an increasing awareness of all the ways we live against that directive for oneness. In a recent article, David Brooks (NYT 4-20-16) points out that this political campaign, as bruising as it has been even to this point, has done some good because it has revealed incredible pain and dysfunction in our society. So he is suggesting that this could be an opportunity – a chance to figure out the response to all that pain and alienation. Maybe, he says, we should spend some time with people who are not just like us – to really hear what life is like for them. And maybe we need to "rebuild the sense that we're all in this together." We're facing, he thinks, not only a crisis of solidarity, but of TRUST which leads to a mentality in which everyone is out for him or herself alone. Maybe, he says, we need to build a ladder of HOPE, listening, first of all, and then figuring out what's working across the country and then putting out energy there. He thinks that this will take a long time but intends to devote his column to that effort over the next months and years. And it WILL take a long time. But, in that regard, listen to some words of the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr:

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can

be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”

Hopeful words, encouraging us to do the hard work of getting past difference to oneness. But most hopeful of all, I think, is that Jesus is praying this prayer for us. And surely that prayer is so much more powerful than all our human failings. We can live trusting that prayer. Amen.