



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 7 (C)

So the World May Believe

[RCL] Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

Trust in God is at the heart of our faith. Jesus taught us to trust in God, the Holy Trinity. We also discover in the Gospels how Jesus leaned into that same trust as he routinely went apart from others to pray. In our reading from John for today, we get to listen in on the prayer that Jesus offered on the night before he died. Jesus places his trust in the first person of the Trinity, whom he calls the “Righteous Father.”

All four Gospels describe Jesus as a person of prayer who routinely set time apart for this purpose. His first followers took this part of Jesus’ life as a given. Jesus prayed as a part of his ongoing connection to the Trinity and additionally as an example to his followers. Everything Jesus did was done through prayer. Prayer was as much an essential of Jesus’ life as food and water. We see most fully how essential prayer was for him on the night before he died. All of the Gospels tell of Jesus praying fervently on that dark night of the soul. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we hear only that Jesus prayed for the cup to pass from him, as he did not want to suffer and die. We also read how he submitted himself to God’s will, trusting that this was best.

Our reading today is part of a longer prayer in the 17th chapter of John. Jesus has already prayed for the strength for his coming crucifixion. Next, he prayed for his disciples. Then, at the end of the prayer, Jesus broadened the group for whom he prayed. Jesus says, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.” That means us. We have come to believe in Jesus because of the word of the first disciples. Had they never gone out and told Jesus’ story, we never would have heard it. We believe today because of an unbroken chain of believers back to the time of those first disciples. When Jesus prays for “those who will believe in me through their word,” Jesus is praying for those of us gathered here today and for all the Christians around the world.

Jesus prays for us, “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.” Jesus’ heart’s desire is that we may be one with God and through that oneness with the triune God we may be one with one another. The logical conclusion of this unity is Jesus’ true desire, that through this unity, the world may see and know that Jesus is God’s own Son, the savior of the world. Jesus’ desire was that all of us Christians around the world could be one.

In essential belief, we do remain more unified than our denominational differences might lead an outsider to believe. We believe in one Trinitarian God who is best known through Jesus, the Son. Christians around the world still hold to the faith affirmed by that church council that met in Nicea in the year 325. That declaration of faith, known as the Nicene Creed, contains a basic outline of Christian beliefs that the vast majority of Christians affirm to this day. We also affirm the Apostles' Creed as a statement of our faith.

Yet, in looking to history, one sees how we have failed to measure up to the ideal. The Christian Church in the East and West split apart in theological disagreements in the eleventh century that pitted those called Orthodox (meaning "proper belief") against the Catholics (meaning "universal"). Later wars between Protestants and Roman Catholics would rage across Europe with many thousands dying at the hands of their fellow Christians as Jesus wept. To this day, Christians arguing about what we believe and how best to live into our faith gives non-Christians cause to wonder about the truth we say we do agree on.

Jesus would sometimes lament his disciples' lack of faith, but in doing so, he was not disturbed that they needed more specific dogma. When Jesus appeared to Thomas a week after he was with the other disciples in the Upper Room, he said, "Do not doubt but believe," to call him to put his trust in God once again after the resurrection. Jesus longed for them and us to simply trust in God more.

And on the night before he died, Jesus prayed that we would know the unity within the Holy Trinity so that "the world may believe." We know that God is a Trinity of persons—one being, yet three distinct persons. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are one, and yet each is unique. We too are to be unique persons, separate from one another and yet in communion with each other. As we are to be one as Jesus and the Father are one, then we do not need there to be no differences among us. The goal is not to lose yourself into a group so fully that there is no "you" left. That's what happens with a cult, which wants you to lose your identity into the group. Christianity teaches that God made you unique, with unique gifts to offer. Jesus' prayer leaves open this diversity within unity as we Christians are not to merely be one, but to be one as Jesus and the Father are one.

We are not all created just alike and so we will each approach God a little differently. Various churches allow this helpful diversity that allows us each to find the best way for us to approach God within a loving community of fellow Christians. There is no need to break down the uniqueness found within various branches of the Christian faith. We do see the face of Jesus in those of other churches whose beliefs and practices may differ and so we have common ground on which to stand. We should find ways to show that, in our diversity, we remain essentially one.

The goal of this unity "that the world may believe" is because angels rejoice when someone trapped in a life turned from God comes to put their trust in the creator who made them out of love for love and sent Jesus to redeem them. Even a single person coming to that life-changing knowledge is what causes heaven

to rejoice. While moving from one church may not crank up the heavenly chorus, finding a church where you are both at home and challenged to live more fully into your faith can be helpful.

The other churches in our community are not competition, but allies in the cause of spreading the trust in God that Jesus called us to have. We don't have to have a one-size-fits-all church to live out our faith in Jesus. We do, however, need to work together in every way we can so that all may see that what binds us together matters more to us than any disagreements. And when we find that political differences are increasingly divisive, signs of unity are even more important for our communities. We don't have to settle all of our differences in order to work together on loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Those of us who have found peace beyond understanding in relationship with the God who loves us far too much to leave us as we are, should long for everyone to experience the healing and wholeness we have found. The more we can join with others in our community to live into our faith by serving all in need, the more that we will show the world the oneness we have in Christ. In the process of making that essential unity real, we receive the surprising gift of finding the face of Jesus in people with whom we disagree. What we hold in common is that the love within us is the love within the Trinity. This love is deeper than any division and stronger than any hate. This is the love that makes us one even, as our Triune God is one.

***The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue** is the Bishop of the Diocese of Georgia. He previously served on the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church and was the church planter for King of Peace Episcopal Church in Kingsland, Georgia.*