



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Easter 7 (C)

#### Divine Unity

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

Today's gospel reading contains the climax and culmination of what is known as the "Farewell Discourse" or "High Priestly Prayer". In this scene, John has Jesus and the disciples (minus Judas Iscariot) in the room after the washing of the feet and the last supper. Here, in the longest recorded prayer of Jesus, he prays to the Father, asking that his disciples enjoy the unity shared between the Father and himself. He prays not only for those in the room with him, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word."

The gospel reading from today speaks of a divine unity. Jesus prays that his followers may be one as he and the Father are one. Reflecting on Jesus' prayer gives us space to examine what divine unity looks like, and what's worth uniting around. This vision of unity is a powerful challenge. In our shared world today, it's easy to look around and spot disunity. It's easy to point to the world, seemingly fracturing around us, and see only polarization, inequity, and asymmetry. One need only turn on the local or global news to be struck by a lack of unity, even among Christians. The damage of division is all too well known on individual and institutional levels. Schisms and separations have become a painful part of the story of the global Anglican Communion these last decades. War and conflict have raged between groups of Christians. Where is the unity prayed for by Jesus? Have we as Christians simply failed to live out this unity imagined in Jesus' prayer?

Throughout church history, humanity has seen glimpses of this divine unity. Stories are passed down of saints dwelling together in community that is not defined by tolerance or mere acceptance. To borrow a nautical metaphor, they row together in the same direction, overflowing with God's love. From a theological perspective, divine unity is not uniformity nor sameness, but rather flows out of right relationship with oneself, others, and creation.

It's interesting to note that Jesus does not here *command* unity. This passage where Jesus prays to the Father follows discourse between him and his disciples in chapters 13-16. In chapter 13, the new commandment he gives to his disciples is to love one another. This is lived out in the story presented in Acts. Paul and Silas have been thrown in jail for exorcising a demon of divinization from a slave girl, abruptly cutting off her owners' source of income. Paul and Silas are thus beaten and jailed. But then, the story does not

become just about escape, but an inverted story of rescue. Paul and Silas are singing hymns and praying into the night. Then, suddenly—the Scriptures tell us—there is an earthquake, and miraculously, the doors fling open, and the shackles break apart. But instead of fleeing off into the night, Paul and the other prisoners remain. The jailer, about to kill himself, is stopped by Paul, who calls out letting him know that the prisoners are all still there. This grace that Paul and Silas show to the unnamed jailer is an act of invitational love. Paul does not coerce or threaten the jailer into joining their team or converting to their beliefs. No, he responds with unnatural grace and love. From there, the jailer takes them to his home where they eat together and rejoice, falling into this pattern of early Christian community painted throughout the rest of the book of Acts. God’s unity is not coercive but invitational. In this story, disruptive love comes first, and only then do unity and community follow.

Throughout history, unity has been manufactured by power through coercion, propaganda, and elimination of dissidence. But the unity that is born from God’s love is not about control but about liberation. The ending of this story of Paul and Silas stands in stark contrast to the story of Peter’s jailbreak just a few chapters earlier in Acts 12. In that story, an angel led Peter out of prison, and Herod subsequently had the jailers executed. Here we see that God’s redemption and liberation are not just for the prisoners, but indeed, the invitation extends even to the jailer. The jailer’s place in society is complicated, for he carries out the coercive violence of the state against the prisoners, but he is also subject to the violence of the state as seen in his hopelessness when he thinks the prisoners have escaped. On the one hand, he is the oppressor, and yet on the other hand, he is simply caught up in a larger system of oppression. And this reflects the reality of the world around us. While it would be so much easier to cast each and every person as villain or hero, the world is more complex than this binary view. We see here that God’s unity is not a top-down coercion, but emerges wherever it will. Though this passage starts off with the liberation of the clearly oppressed slave girl and then the prisoners, even those who stand in for power, oppression, and coercion are included in the invitation of God’s love. These passages from the lectionary, and the broader Scriptural context, are clear that God’s unity is grounded in love and liberation.

Divine unity is divinely other. In other words, the unity that is born from God’s love and liberation is not human unity. It is transcendent. A divine unity rejects any and all coercive pictures of human oneness. Humans have leveraged tools like empire, invasion, and colonization to force a false unity upon others. Cult leaders have suppressed difference and dissent by molding followers into subordination. Nation-states have waged propaganda and reeducation campaigns to align their citizens to singular visions of power.

The otherness of God’s unity also means it is not born from consensus, dialogue, or even democracy. While essential and vital tools for humans to gather and move forward, too often a democratic majority can ignore the needs and voices of the few. In the same vein, calls for dialogue are often around a table preset with normalized assumptions of whose voices, opinions, and cultures matter. It’s not that these things are bad, but their limits must be acknowledged.

Divine unity is categorically different from these pictures. But that does not mean that Christians and churches are immune to these very human impulses for fracture, division, or control. The church has

struggled with living out this divine unity for as long as the church has been around. A huge percentage of the epistles are written because of human differences emerging within the church. Even Peter and Paul have their moments of bickering and disagreement. But there is no forcing divine unity.

Today's readings from John and Acts offer us an important lesson on unity. We must acknowledge that God's unity is not coercive. Unity is born of an invitation to love one another in a radical, sacrificial way. Divine unity is not born of a focus on who belongs and who doesn't. Christians are not one for the sake of being one but are united *in* the love of God. By creating a compelling invitation into a radically different and disruptive vision for humanity, the church lives out its ever-expanding call to love. The church is a place of disruptive love. And from this radically different orientation towards the world, each other, and ourselves, divine unity emerges.

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