

**“That They May All Be One”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoa**  
**The Seventh Sunday of Easter**  
**Sunday, May 16, 2010**  
**Scripture: John 17:20-26**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Gracious God, as we hear and think about your word to us today, quiet any voices in our minds, that we might hear only your voice. And then, after having heard your word, help us live as you would have us live. Amen.*

I know that by now most of you know what a CSI buff I am. In fact, I have told several people that when I get tired of being a minister, I'm going to go to school to be a CSI! I love the mystery and the excitement and the glamour. I also just love how all the micro-processors race and run at breakneck speed through millions of fingerprints in tons of data bases. We have known for a very long time that the delicate swirls, ridges, and patterns that lie at the tips of our fingers can serve as a form of personal identification – just like snow flakes there are no two exactly alike. So as those processors hum and buzz, they are making it possible for the detectives to either catch the bad guy or exonerate the good guy.

But fingerprints are not the only ways in which each of us is unique. Our DNA is also uniquely our own. Each cell of our body is genetically coded just for us. High-tech gadgetry has made it possible for us now to open sealed doors just by looking at them. Okay, more accurately it is just by looking through a retinal scanner, because the shape, diameter, and surface bumps of your baby blues (or browns or greens) is unrepeated in any other person. Oh – and by the way – if you happen to have an x-ray of your skull lying around, check out the shape of your sinus cavities. Those too are unrepeated in any other person.

God made each of us wholly and totally

different from each other. Yet as Jesus offers up to the Father his own personal “Lord’s Prayer”, he prays for “oneness” among all those who follow him as his disciples. But remember that when he prayed those words, Jesus was not just looking around the Passover table at twelve individuals – none of whom were learned scholars or Torah experts, by the way. Yes, Jesus was praying for those who had followed him for the past three years. But he was also praying for those who would come to faith because of the words and witness of those first twelve. And Jesus was praying for the generation after that one...and for the generation after that one...and for all future generations...until the end of time.

If you ask me, it wasn’t Jesus’ prayer that everyone would be alike. Just think about it. Gentiles, Samaritans, women of “questionable morals,” tax collectors, Roman soldiers – these were the focus of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the mission field for each new post-resurrection – Pentecost generation. Outcasts and off-the-radar rejects were the first to hear and heed the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, the God in our midst.

Certainly, Jesus wasn’t looking for a “unity” which would bring all these outsiders, these on-the-edgers, these in the margins and peripherals, together into a new “oneness”. My friends, the unity Jesus desired wasn’t unity of cultures. It was not unity of liturgies and prayers. It was not unity of theological systems or philosophical schemas. It is not unity of ideas or ideals.

The “oneness” for which Jesus prayed is a oneness of heart and a oneness of love. The “oneness” Jesus prayed for was the condition of hearts which had experienced the truth that the love with which God loved him was the love with which God loves us. Did you get it? Did you hear it? The love which united Father and Son is the love that the Son then passes on to

each one who trusts him. Love is the divine gift that defies all physics. When love is divided in two, you don’t get half as much, you get twice as much. When love is hoarded, it shrinks. When love is shared, it spreads.

Think about it this way. When you have one child, you love that child with all your heart, mind and soul. There is no love held back for a “rainy day.” Then when you have a second child, does your love for the first become less so that you have love available for the second?

Of course not! Your love grows, expands, encompasses and envelops the new child. Love never has to be rationed. On the contrary, love must be overspent, over-extended, overdrawn, all the time – for that is the only way it can grow. Love cannot be hoarded and set aside for some future date. Our own individual portions of love must be used up in full everyday. If we follow that prescription, the more you use it, the more it grows, and we are guaranteed an inexhaustible resource of love for our whole life.

And that love, my friends, is the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they are poured out into the hearts of every disciple. That is the subject of Jesus’ final prayer. There is no question that Christ’s prayer was for unity. But he was not praying that all believers would be alike. Instead, the unity Jesus was praying for is one in which we are stronger together than we are apart. And that is possible because the Holy Spirit accomplishes what God has ordained. The Spirit completes the work of God in Christ by calling us together, enlightening us with his Word, filling us with power through the sacraments, and then sending us out to gather others in his name and around the table with us. By his power, we are one – not by our initiatives, not by our own creativities, not by our own inventions. We are one because we are God’s, claimed in the waters of baptism, joined together in his body, the Church, and empowered for

living as a community of faith – through his Spirit.

The gifts that God has given each of us individually are to be joined together to benefit the whole. We are to be a living organism, a body which works together in ways we cannot work apart. That means that we need to share our gifts with one another. In fact, in the New Testament, whenever gifts are mentioned, they are always mentioned in the light and the context of the community. Only as God's gifts build up this community of faith are they being used as they were intended.

As important as it is for all of us in the body of the church right here on the corner of Scotland and Highland, though, Jesus says it is more important that, we share those gifts out in the world in which we live. Our oneness is a witness to the world of who Jesus is. People look to us to understand Jesus. Why – because we claim to be his body. And further, the only way the world will know about his love for them is through us. We are the arms of the cross outstretched and growing, every time we join hands with others in love. Joined to Christ in baptism, we are joined with one another in his body, and we have the responsibility to reach out to others in that love and forgiveness and grace we have come to know and experience in this place.

And maybe even more important than that is the way in which our oneness affects our stance in the world. To believe, to really believe, that we are joined to Christ and to one another and can find wholeness and oneness in that union, puts us in direct opposition with the preaching of the world around us.

The unity Jesus prayed for is one that would be about the Father's business. And what is that business? To a world of sinful people – that we would have a word of forgiveness. To a world which can't seem to distinguish between right and wrong – that we would have truth in

our proclamations. To a world which practices war, we would announce a peace that goes beyond human understanding or engineering. What is the Father's business? It's about love and grace and justice much more than slogans, and it's about how we live much more than by what we say.

Jesus is hoping for a deeper unity – one which transcends the differences that we too often view as obstacles rather than gifts. He wants each member of his church to feel that she or he has a place that is not simply tolerated, but essential to the whole. It is a unity that doesn't have to be imposed, but one that is already present among Jesus' followers.

The purpose of Jesus unity isn't some stand-alone virtue of unity for its own sake. It's unity for the sake of the world, "so that the world may know that "the Father sent him, that He loves us even as he loved Jesus." In our Presbyterian tradition, one of the chief ends of the church is "the exhibition of the Kingdom of God to the world." Looking inside the church is supposed to give you an idea of what God's love for God's children looks like. That is why Jesus wants the church to be one. Not to obliterate our differences but to see that God's love is big enough to encompass all of them, so that the world may come to know that same love.

Grace, Amazing Grace. Amen.

*Thanks to Leonard Sweet for his sermon, "Fingerprints and Lovemarks", Glenn E. Ludwig his sermon "A Strange, New Math" and Andrew Foster Connors for his sermon, "The Church Where We Belong".*

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