

12 May 2024, Easter 7B
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19
Psalm 1

Protected by Our Oneness

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. **Amen.**

Despite the fact that we are in Easter and celebrating the Resurrection, today's Gospel lesson comes from before the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Jesus and his friends have finished their last meal together before the crucifixion, and he's taught them some final pre-Crucifixion lessons, including the new commandment to love one another as Jesus has loved them. Before they go out, Jesus prays for his beloved followers.

This isn't the first time Jesus prays to God his and our Father and Mother, but if you pause to consider it, it seems odd that Jesus prays to God. Remember that we believe Jesus is God. Plus, Jesus tells us several times,

including in today's Gospel lesson, that he and God the Father are one. So, why would Jesus seemingly pray to himself?

It's not Trinity Sunday yet, and regardless, you may be relieved to know that I am not going to attempt a theological exposition of the Trinity. But at its core, we believe that the three persons of the Godhead are distinct and yet one. They participate in each other's work throughout eternity and throughout our existence. Parent, Word, and Spirit are present and active in every aspect of our lives from creation onward. The persons of the Trinity exist in perpetual, balanced, perfect love of one another. They make space for one another. They listen to one another. And yet, they share one will in eternal relationship. God the Mother already knows Jesus' prayer, and Jesus knows that. Nonetheless, they talk to one another; they listen to one another.

Jesus prays to his beloved Parent: "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." In that prayer, Jesus expresses not just a hope for the future, but God's plan for us all along. The divine intent for us was always oneness, and God's work is always directed at restoring us to the oneness God always intended.

What is Jesus talking about when he prays that we may be one? The oneness Jesus prays we experience is the same oneness Jesus shares with the other

persons of the Trinity. They are distinct and yet so fully in relationship that, where one person of the Trinity is, the entire Godhead is. They are not the same and yet share one being. That's what God wants for us. That we can be distinct in the beautiful rainbow of diversity in which God created us but that those distinctions not be a source of division. We are meant to rest so completely in God's love that we are one with God and one with each other. God wants us to be one with each other and with the God, while celebrating our many shades of being.

This is a beautiful prayer for us, but we— collectively and each of us — all too often land so very far from the oneness God seeks for us. We all, myself included, are way too quick to use the kaleidoscope of diversity in which we are created as an excuse for division. Our go-to is “us versus them” thinking. Differences in our race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, height, weight, age, and a host of other characteristics meant to show us the diverse beauty of God's image become excuses to harm one another.

We even use division to limit God. We claim that the way in which God has revealed the Divine Essence to us is right and everyone else is wrong. Monotheists, polytheists, and non-theists fight. Among the Abrahamic traditions, we profess the same God and yet Christians, Jews, and Muslims war with one another. Even among Christians, we are quick to claim that this denomination

or that one is the one true Church, the one path to God. We serve as gatekeepers limiting access to God.

Here's a simple example. Recently, the United Methodist Church approved a long-awaited full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church. Surely, there was much celebration, but I also saw from too many of our Episcopalian siblings a rush to list all the reasons it won't work. There was a rush to justify remaining divided rather to seek oneness.

There is hope, though. Even as many rush toward to division, even as some thrive on our division, even as we are not perfect in always pursuing God's prayer of oneness for us, many are working hard to seek the very thing for which Jesus prays. Even when we get it wrong, sometimes we get it right. We can do it. We just have to keep at it. I'll share two recent events that give me hope.

The Thursday before last, Newton's Mayor invited the clergy who serve faith communities in this City to meet in her office. In introducing ourselves, we were asked to share one thing that was top of mind. As I listened to each person in that circle, I saw a push toward the oneness for which Jesus prays. Though coming come from different faith traditions and serving different congregations, consistently each clergy person expressed a desire for oneness. We expressed desires to lift one another up, to work together, to support each other. During that meeting, we had difficult conversations on difficult issues in which there

were different views. Yet, we listened to each other. We remained united in the goal of being together and being in loving relationship with one another.

This past week, I traveled our Diocese with the nominees for our next bishop. We crisscrossed the Diocese. We went to Boston, Roxbury, Dorchester, Barnstable, Dartmouth, Taunton, Dedham, Needham, Hopkinton, Lawrence, and Andover. I wish everyone could see our Diocese the way I got to this week. We saw the power of relationships. We forged new relationships. We saw people giving of themselves to make the world better for their siblings. We witnessed deep listening to and caring for others. Those of us who were privileged to have this experience, even in our diversity coming from all over the Diocese, left the week with a hunger for oneness. We wondered, “How can we do more together? How can we support one another without using our regions as barriers?”

While our Diocese is truly awesome, oneness doesn't end at the Diocesan border or the state border. The point is that this wider view of our Diocese, this feeling of being a part of something bigger than ourselves, bigger than our parishes, bigger than our cities and towns, caused us to look outward. We are not silos. God never meant for us to be. God means for us to be together, constantly seeking relationship with each other.

Oneness is not about being the same. Oneness is not about conformity. Oneness is not about always agreeing. Oneness is about being in and remaining in relationship. Oneness is about recognizing that it's not about you or me or any one of us; it's about us. Oneness is about listening graciously to each other. Oneness is about stepping aside to make space for others to join the circle. Oneness is about seeking the face of God in our siblings and wondering what God might be doing in and through them.

Whatever our differences, whatever our disagreements, whatever reasons there might be for us to be divided – and trust me, there are and will always be many – Jesus' prayer for us, God's hope for us, is that we run toward relationship. When we do that, we are, individually and collectively, better. When we do that, God's image and God's joy is made complete in us.

As we approach the end of this Easter Season, let us find protection in seeking oneness with God and each other.

Amen.