
That They May All Be One (and a sermon against Christian nationalism)

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Seventh Sunday of Easter, (The Sunday after Ascension Day) – Year C

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23) ...I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17:26)

Jesus wants us to be one! Jesus wants us to be one! Jesus wants us to be one! He said it three times in today's gospel.

And most of us, these days, agree; that sure would be a good thing. Every day, another writer, or another preacher, complains that we are not united. It is easy to find people lamenting about how divided our country is, or our church is, our school is, or our party is.

It is harder, much harder, to talk about how united we are. Indeed, people like me are a bit reluctant to talk about how united we are, because we get accused of being naïve. "Wake up!" people tell me, "Can't you see how divided we are?"

Well, of course I can. Of course I can. My reply is this: does it do any good to keep declaring how divided we are?

I suspect that it does not do much good. Every time I share the "news" that we are divided, my conversation partner usually has a quick answer. And, no matter who my conversation partner is, it is the same answer. The response always seems to be like this: "Yes, we are divided. And the answer to our division is: ME!" We would not be so divided if you just agreed with ME. We would not be so divided if you just saw things MY way! We would not be so divided if you just joined MY party.

I suppose most of us are not so crass as to say it exactly that way. But, internally, that is how most of human society behaves. We like to think we welcome people and accept people. But, what we usually mean is that we welcome you to become like one of me. One of the most important things I have learned about racism in my time, is how white people, people like me, say we welcome black people. But what we want, without even realizing it, is for the black people to be white people. We welcome you, but we welcome you to become like we are.

Remember Sheila? I am reminded of Robert Bellah's still brilliant book, *Habits of the Heart* (1985), where he wrote about a real person named Sheila. When asked what her religion was, Sheila replied, "Sheilaism," by which she meant her highly individualized selection of what to believe and what not to believe. Robert Bellah thus suggested that America, at that time, had 235 million different religions in it!

Well, the age of Sheilaism is here! "I want us all to be one!" we say. We even quote Jesus; "Jesus wants us all to be one!" But the only way we can see how to be one, is for people to become more like me, agree with me, follow my advice, let me decide who to hire and who to fire, let me decide who to convict and who to pardon.

Three times in today's gospel passage, Jesus prays that his disciples might be one. So, what does it mean to

"all be one?"

I remember the great hippies of the late sixties, and early seventies, when we teenagers were clamoring for unity, claiming to be individualists, thinking for ourselves. Frank Zappa, the rock musician, looked out at his audience one day, in his crusty way; and he saw them all claiming to be distinctive and hip. "Don't kid yourselves," he said, "you are all in uniform." They were wearing the same things: bell bottom blue jeans and tie-dyed tee shirts.

Does "being one" mean dressing the same way? Does uniformity mean unity? Of course not. Does thinking the same way bring unity? Does "being one" mean lock-step agreement? Heavens, no. That is absolutism and shallow thinking, and even tyranny. *E pluribus Unum*, says the great seal of United States. Out of the many, one. Does "being one" mean to be many states, but one nation? Maybe something like that.

But there is a way of "Being One" that is even bigger than that. Yes, "Being One" means sharing core values, having the same goal and purpose! But here's the thing: those values, those purposes, have to be bigger than any one of us. Those values and purposes have to be bigger than Sheila, have to be bigger than any one of us individually.

This is why Jesus added something to his prayer that might all be one. He added: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us." Jesus prayed for a unity that is like the Father and the Son, like God in Christ, not a unity that is simply centered around a Sheila. Jesus prayed for a unity in God, and not in a god of our making. Jesus knew that unity does not just happen with a good idea, or a successful campaign, or even an exciting figure. Unity happens when we gather in an identity that is bigger than us!

Jesus, in his time, knew about various political attempts at unity. The Babylonians had attempted to create a unified empire by taking over Jerusalem and exiling the people. Exile has often been an instrument of purity, an instrument of purification.

Jesus knew of the Roman Empire, who had set up puppet governors like Pontius Pilate. The Roman Empire had even taken over the Temple appointments, making sure that the government okayed and installed the high priests of the time. That was not going to be satisfactory unity either.

Jesus would teach the world about the profound unity that occurs when love happens. And love happened in Jesus. Jesus knew suffering, and he loved. Jesus knew loss, and he loved. For Jesus, to be one is to love like God loves. God's love exists outside government, both before government and after government.

Jesus knew loss, and he turns that loss into redemption. Jesus does not redeem by satisfying some violent rule of retribution. No! He redeems us by sharing suffering. By sharing suffering. Jesus loves us. Jesus is Lord because he shares our suffering, not because he violently causes more violence.

It is that love, the profound love of Jesus, which creates the true Christian values that hold us together, and the Christian values that Saint Paul would call the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). There is no law against them, said Saint Paul.

Sadly, in Christian history, those values get forgotten from time to time. People get swept away by shallow fervor and weak foresight. People get swept away by individualism. But the real Christian values do reappear. And they will reappear in this age, too, even though we are threatened by something called "Christian nationalism." Christian nationalism is any belief system that allies Christianity with a particular national politics, or a particular political party.

Christian nationalism erodes both Christianity and nationhood. True Christianity does not let the Roman Empire install its own, bought, high priests in the temple! This is because no empire, and no country, can successfully define Christianity, or contain Christianity. God is bigger! And only because God is bigger, can God make us one.

Jesus prays for a unity in God, and not in a god of our own making. Thus, Jesus found value in losing himself, for the sake of others. And that is the overwhelming character of the true God! The true God lowers himself, to become human. God, too, loses self, by becoming human in Jesus.

Thus, the ultimate Christian value is to lose oneself. To lose oneself in love and giving. To lose Sheila! To lose individualism.

That is what makes us one. We do not become one simply by taking up arms and deleting people or policies we do not like. Unity is not absolutism! Unity is not uniformity! Unity is not deleting people, not kicking people off the island, not firing people, not exiling people, not crucifying our enemies, not mocking our antagonists.

What makes us one is the love of Christ. What makes us one is not the love of ourselves, but the love of Christ, taking us beyond ourselves, into a whole different world. Listen again to how Jesus prayed for our unity:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

AMEN.

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