

Sermon, 20 May 2007—Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 47; Revelation 22:12-20; John 17:20-6

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The passage from the Gospel according to St. John that we heard today is the conclusion of what is called Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. This is the final prayer at the Last Supper, so they are the last words Jesus speaks in the presence of his followers before going out with them to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he will be arrested and led away to crucifixion. John seems to intend them to be heard as a last will and testament: this is the future Jesus asks God to ensure for his followers when he is gone. He prays that we will be one as he and his Father are one.

Each year, on the Seventh Sunday of Easter, the Sunday that falls between the Feast of Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost, we hear a different portion of this prayer. We remembered the Ascension, the end of Jesus' Resurrection sojourn with his disciples, this past Thursday. For forty days, he came and went through locked doors, visited them unrecognized until the moment of his departure, opened their minds to understand Scripture, and breathed on them. Then he was taken up into heaven, so that he might fill the entire cosmos with his grace and prepare a place for us to join him. Next Sunday is Pentecost, the fiftieth day after his Resurrection, a Jewish festival during which the promised gift Jesus' community waited for arrived: the Holy Spirit descended in tongues of fire, releasing his followers from their hesitancy and dependency, and driving them out into the street with such vociferous exuberance the onlookers reckoned they were drunk.

This empty Sunday, between these two events, when his followers felt his absence, but waited in expectation of they-did-not-know-what, holding their

breath, until Power became known to them—this Sunday is a perfect depiction of where we pass most of our Christian life. We recall that he walked among us, but he has left us behind now. We know he was here, because the emptiness we gather around feels so great some times. We hold his baffling promises in our lap, not knowing what to do with them, not fully trusting them. We have been promised One who will call back into our minds all that Jesus did and said, One who will testify to Jesus' presence, One who will glorify him, One who will lead us into all truth, One who will advocate for us, encourage us, empower us, and dwell with us. Unless God acts to verify these beliefs, they remain improbable and tepid in us. In this interval—much longer than ten days for most of us, sometimes lasting our entire life—we wait and use our own breath to blow on the cooling embers of our trust and hope. This Sunday, we have—as Jesus' disciples had—the opportunity to consider his prayer.

What he asked for is dizzying: as God is in him, as he is in God, so may we be in them, so we may be one, as the Son and the Father are one, as he is in us, as God is in him, so may we be completely one, so the world may see that God loves us just as the Father loves the Son, and so that we can see the glory God has been giving Christ since before the foundation of the world. If all you pick up from those words is how thickly braided this astonishing cable of love is, that is enough. If all you can handle is that Jesus desires for us a mutual love so interwoven that its toughness cannot fray, that is enough. Think of it: his love for God and God's love for him and his love for us and our love for him and God's love for us and our love for God and our love for each other—even if one strand should wear thin and snap, the entire rope holds for eternity. It stretches across all time. The world praises God for us, at the relief that love is possible from now until the culmination of time; and we see God's glory, in the disclosure that love is generative from before the foundation of time until now.

How could we not collapse with awe and gratitude in the presence of this all-embracing loving reconciliation—not a negotiation between enemies, but the revelation that to be led into all truth is to be led into the arms of someone we judged to be a stranger, but with whom we are actually one?

Now, our appropriation of this desirable and necessary oneness can be regressive or progressive. We can live it out in destructive or constructive ways. We can wish to return to the Narcissistic oblivion of infancy or strive to grow in a companionship of persons, which is what the Trinity is.

In its constrictive and corrosive form, our longing for union is a desire to repair the wound of creation as we know it, that is, our birth. Before birth, we were fully one with what carried and nurtured us, keeping us safe and warm, bathed in a translucent darkness. To be expelled from that, to fall into this cold void, where we learn hunger and isolation with shocking abruptness, where we must work for food and breath, where our very first product is waste that must be cleaned from us if we are to thrive—if that is what it means to become human, who would not, from levels below our consciousness, long to return to the undifferentiated peace broken at birth?

This loss and our anguish over it germinate and bear fruit as our separate disconsolate ego. Our pain at realizing that we are not our own mother is inescapable. We discover that birth is separation from our food, our safety, and our comfort. Realizing we are separate from what keeps us alive, a primordial terror takes hold of us: if I am this isolated, this needy, this dependent, how will I ensure that I get what I need? So our ego unfolds in us to compensate for our not being complete and self-sustaining—for our not being God, in other words. It is designed to acquire and to defend what is necessary for life. This fear-based machine, far below our consciousness, fabricates our sense of a self as alienated, lonely, and hungry. We prowl the world convinced that we can, by

deception and cunning, or by force of will, compensate for the loss of our home-womb. So we burn ourselves up, at a rolling boil or a low simmer, depending on our temperament, determined to locate a lover that will please us, a community that will indulge us, children whom we can exhibit as our accomplishments, homes that will flatter and coddle us, habits that will stimulate us, treating the world as either our mirror or our dispensary. Ironically, we construct an ego intended to advocate for us, encourage us, empower us, dwell with us, designed to make the gift of the Holy Spirit unnecessary, but ultimately unable ever to lead us into all truth.

The great human paradox is that our deep generator, running on fear, produces as its final self-defense an utter denial of our brokenness and terror and need. The problem, it decides, is not how I am in the world, not my cravings and insecurities and panics and impatience, but all these other beings around me who won't do right, who seem sluggish and gloomy to me, who forget the solicitous attention due to my inner child. In all of this, dear friends, since I am for this interval your priest-in-charge, I am the chief of sinners. It shouldn't shock you to learn that I have many besetting sins; you will probably become familiar with most of them and will be blessed with many opportunities to learn the virtues of forgiveness. One of my most bedeviling is an addiction to perfection. Perfectionists also pray that we all may be one, that external expression and inner ideals be one, whatever the cost. This is unwillingness to consent to the way things are, lack of trust in its toughest form, an attempt to outdo God in running the world. I can at least confess that I have always been reluctant to accept what God places before me; it never is quite what I expected when I imagined it. Perhaps you live some version of this. Lucifer fell, the Muslims say, when he refused to acknowledge Adam. "Why should fire bow to clay?" he demanded.

This regressive state is not the union for which Jesus prays. Wanting the church to be a club that helps us do good and look good and feel good—those are the ego’s goals, not God’s. Something greater and deeper and more awful is offered to us and desired for us in Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer. He knew, as he prayed, that his glorification was at hand. That glorification was the moment he was lifted high on the cross. This is not some morbid death fetish, but the depiction, in this Gospel, of what it means to be so grounded in God, so united with divinity, that one can lay down one’s life for one’s friends, that one can let go of self-preferences and self-protections, that one can fulfill Scripture deliberately by not struggling to extend one’s own existence. It is the final detachment from ego. It was only possible because of what Jesus articulates in the prayer we heard earlier: if he and God are one, then the inviolable security of that mutual love can be on display before all the world, and nothing the world does can rupture it, and he can never be snatched out of God’s hands.

This is the truest of all claims, even though we have a hard time believing it. Like a great aquifer, it runs underground. It is that deepest support of the self that underlies the details and accidents of personhood and is quite unconcerned about ego. It is what we trust and what produces that trust, unknown to us. You are already one with others in ways that you never constructed on your own to serve your own ends. You cannot extricate yourself from your oneness with nature: what you do to this planet, you do to your self. You cannot escape being a member of the human race: how you treat others permanently alters your self. You cannot opt out of your oneness in God: we do not know God, but are instead known by God, who knows us in Christ, and therefore knows us all as one in Him. We cannot interrupt the unity that God has established, first by our creation, then by our atonement, finally by our sanctification. We cannot violate the unity God has achieved by making

divinity known to us and in us. To the extent that we are known by God—and we are known by God in Christ—we cannot be lost to that life that *is* Life. God creates us, seeks us out, draws us to him, raises us up. God does not overthrow or contradict Creation, but prizes, completes, and perfects it in Christ. We can do nothing but clear out the underbrush of our primordial anxiety so we can bow down and drink from this living water.

All this, we Christians depict in our claims of the Body of Christ. As members of that Body, we are the hands and feet and eyes and ears of Christ, who is our head; and as the head coordinates the rest of the physical body, so Christ longs to guide what our ears and eyes perceive and where our feet and hands move. Even the Eucharist, whatever it truly is, is also a reminder that things are not what they seem, that we receive in an instant more than we realize, that good gifts, full of grace and strength, are never far from us, and that God comes to us, inextricably united with what God has made and blessed, whether we recognize God or not. But how could God not act to bring about God's own purposes?

Another way to say that is this. When I try to make myself the center of oneness, to make everything confirm and console me, I simply spin a thin stinking crust over the abyss of my fear, because I can never be sure that I have attracted enough, controlled enough, dominated enough, and stored up enough against the future, to ensure the uninterrupted seamless bliss for which I thirst. But when I perceive God as the center of oneness, I instantly have a place, because God loves and preserves everything God has made. The paradox is this: what I am by circumstance—dust blown together by cosmic wind, clotted into a lump by gravity, orbiting what pours out warmth and light and life—is secure enough for today, because God treasures every instance of our scarred beauty. That is hard to believe, but Jesus is the evidence, who ate with

prostitutes and tax collectors, who was himself condemned and crucified, but whom God raised to life again with all those glorious scars. Every sinner is precious to God, every flawed soul beloved. We, who exhaust and batter ourselves attempting to fly into a mirror so we can merge with the air we think is there, are already aloft in God's love, borne up by eagle's wings.

One final comment: the deepest claim any religion makes is about this mystery of oneness. We Christians claim this mystery manifests itself in three ways. We claim two are one—human and divine—in Christ. We claim three are one—Source and Word and Spirit—in the Godhead. We claim many are one—the communion of saints—in the Church.

Of course, we must realize first of all that most of us don't particularly know whether or not we want to be Christians and to take these claims on as our own claims. But on the day we realize that we do wish to know ourselves as Christians, then we will see that the prayer Jesus prayed for those who would come after him applies directly to us. He prayed that we would be one as he and God are one: God in him in the Incarnation; and he in God in the Trinity; and we in him in the Body of Christ. The totality of our spiritual growth consists of coming to realize that these three claims are true and that what they describe is reality. Then we can glimpse, far off at the distant horizon of our pilgrimage, that it is possible to participate fully in that Holy Oneness, and that even now we can begin to praise the Unity of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, in the singularity of God's eternity for ever.