

Sermon, 4 May 2008—Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68; I Peter 4:12-4; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

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

We have spent the Sundays of this Easter season doing what was done in the ancient church. After new members were initiated into the church, the meaning of the two foundational church practices was discussed with them. These reflections are called the *mystagogia*, because they are a consideration of the *mystical* meaning of the two dominical sacraments, the sacraments that originate in the life of our Lord. He himself was baptized and instructed us to follow that practice; he himself took bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and distributed it, and enjoined us to do that in remembrance of him. Both of these sacraments exist so that our present life can be in our day the human life of God. In both of these sacraments, we remember and show and promise to each other and to all the world the oneness of life in Christ.

Today, we heard in the words of Jesus' prayer over his disciples as they were concluding their last meal together the purpose of sacraments: that we may be one. That is why they were given to us: to remember, to show, and to promise unity with each other and with God. We remember that God made us one through the work of Christ; we show to each other and to all the world what it means to be one; and we enter into a promise that this oneness will be maintained throughout eternity and made effective in our own day.

One of the most extraordinary new aspects of the Book of Common Prayer is the Baptismal Covenant. What had been before a private examination and profession of faith has become an occasion at every baptism for the congregation to reexamine and reaffirm the relationship that baptism creates between us and God and between each of us, one with the

other and with every human being. We make five promises, recognizing each time that we can only keep these promises with God's help. To begin with, it is impossible for us with our own energy and intention to do these things. More importantly, they are, after all, the things that God wants to accomplish, so God becomes the cosigner and guarantor of these promises. If we are willing to place ourselves in God's hands, they will be achieved.

We promise to continue in the doctrine and discipline of the church: reading Scripture together, praying together, giving thanks together, breaking bread together. We promise not to let those things that separate human beings from God have the upper hand in us. We promise to be evangelists, unashamed and clear that we have good news about life which we can directly demonstrate to others and invite them into. We promise to be on the constant lookout for the oneness of all humanity to show up in our life, recognizing and affirming and serving the reconciling purposes of God in others. We promise to do all we can so that everyone will know in their own circumstances the dignity into which God created all humanity.

I fail at every one of these; I hedge and calculate and offer the minimum requirements. There are days when I totter on the edge of the cultural expectation that we can microwave a single serving of religion on Sunday morning and slurp that down while we think of something else, or that we can Google a website where we can download a little inspiration or a little compassion and pledge a little cash so we can feel a little better about ourselves, never knowing if the recipients of our carefully calibrated donations feel a little better about *themselves*. It won't do. There is a vague sense of oneness that we feel when we are oblivious to anything beyond ourselves, but it is the oneness of unconsciousness, undifferentiated navel-gazing. It won't do.

In fact, this is why evangelism and outreach and stewardship are so crucial and so irritating. They are the way the church directs us beyond ourselves. Every murmur that people are basically fine as they are, that circumstances are beyond our control and too great to have an impact on anyway, and that stewardship is only about money—all of those statements are actually cozy and self-consoling, plump with the down of our resentments and our lethargy. They are lullabies—no, let’s trim that word down by a couple of syllables: they are lies.

Most people are either asleep or suffering; they are *not* fine—and Jesus said, “what I say to one I say to all, ‘watch.’” Circumstances *do* change when human conviction is strong enough; they are not beyond our control—and Jesus said, “if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” Stewardship is about the care of *every* aspect of our life under the gaze and in the gift of God; it is not about money, unless you think every aspect of your life is about money—and Jesus said to that anxious affluent young man, “you lack one thing to inherit eternal life: sell what you have, give to the poor, and come follow me.”

Evangelism is being able to tell anyone you meet that you consider yourself one with them and why. Evangelism is every demonstration you make of active respect and concern and good-will for another person when it is done for the sake of Christ. It is every expression of fearlessness and hope shared with another person for the sake of Christ. It is every investment in the well-being of others for the sake of Christ. Evangelism is being able to account for that attitude and those actions when those who observe them ask about them by saying that this oneness that you are acting on when you are with them is God’s gift to us and that you have come to know its truth

because you know Christ, because Christ makes us one—in baptism and Eucharist certainly, but in creation and Incarnation and Resurrection foundationally.

Outreach is being able to show anyone you meet that you consider yourself one with them. Outreach is demonstrating in all your efforts a zeal for restoration and healing and economic provision and justice for the sake of Christ. Outreach is giving not only your cloak, but your shirt, carrying a burden not one mile, but two—these are Jesus’ ideas, not mine—giving the good gifts, the firstfruits, not the blemished and discarded because you are doing it for Christ. Outreach is being able to account for this energy by acknowledging that we are in this together, and that the suffering of any part of the body, hurts us all, and the healing of any part of the body, strengthens us all, because we are one in Christ.

Stewardship is being able to live recognizing that you are one with all that is. Stewardship is knowing that we are sojourners, pilgrims, on a journey, entrusted with no more than a fraction of life and a fragment of its goodness. Stewardship is recognizing that when we meet in an oasis—as surely this place is meant to be in your life—the hospitality code of all us itinerants requires us to open our backpacks and, out of what each one has and places in the middle of the circle, together to make a complete meal that will sustain us all. Stewardship is noticing that the ones who are the happiest are the ones who empty their packs and striving to imitate them—as Jesus said at the last supper he shared with those who had followed him, knowing that he had come from God and was going to God, giving the bread as he was giving himself, washing their feet so that not one of them would hesitate from then one to care for another, “I am telling you this that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.”

In this place, the gift to each other of money, of course, so that we can maintain this place and its work, but more significantly the gift to each other of our skills in service of each other and our time in support of each other and our presence so that we can strengthen and rejoice in each other—all this is the treasuring and fostering of common life, and it is only possible if we believe, affirm, and know that we are one in Christ, that what the sacraments remember, show, and promise is true.

Dear sisters and brothers, if you approach these matters as questions of fund-raising or volunteer support or social service projects, as your choice to opt in or out of this rather bizarre non-profit, then what you live out is a fundamental belief that we are separate from each other, that you look on all this as something you might or might not do, that you believe you do not truly belong, are not yet one with us all. If your basic worldview is that we all stand isolated from each other in a threatening world and that a church is a place to get a little respite from the winds howling across the steppe, which you are willing to support to keep the samovar steaming and the sauna stoked for you when you get back, then what we turn to each other for is alarming, unreasonable, and too costly. But if we belong together, if our being together is to be a sign for ourselves and for others of the oneness of Christ, then we cannot hold back, because nothing less than turning our life together into our priority indicates our conviction that the oneness of all things, revealed in the Risen Christ, can be remembered, shown, and promised here for us and for all who come to know or join us.

To our fallen state, caught up in fear and self-seeking, Christianity is unnatural. If we can become Christians, we will see that this way of life is the most natural thing in the world, because the One who created all that is also accomplished the restoration of all that is. And creation, which makes

us one with everything organically, and salvation, which retrieves all that has been scattered and damaged and reunites it spiritually—all was done so that God could be in us and we could be in God, so that all might be one.

This is what it is to live as an Easter people. Easter people know that every barrier and all bondage have been overthrown, every lack and deficiency has been filled up—and Easter people have the courage to verify that proclamation in their life. Easter people know that nothing, past, present, or future, is out of God's reach. Easter people know that we are no longer slaves, but heirs of all that is. We do not need to cling or acquire, because there is more where that came from, and it all belongs to the family of God. It is all ours, without fear, with fullness of joy, because we are all God's, whom we praise as our Eternal Source, our Only-begotten Word, and our Life-giving Spirit, the One God who makes us one, now and forever.