

ALL TOGETHER, ALL ONE

Rev. Mary Barrett Speers
Acts 1:6-11; John 17:1-11

I have to confess I almost didn't preach on this text, or even read it in worship, although it's the appointed Gospel reading for this year on the Sunday after the Ascension. You see, (we're all different, as we know well in Tuesday Bible study) I'll admit I've never actually been much of a fan of John's Jesus, I much prefer Mark's, and this long discourse, of which I just read only eleven verses near the end, is a good illustration of why.

Number One: it's *three chapters long*! Do we really think the disciples were even paying attention by the time he got to this part? Especially after a big dinner? Were you even able to follow it, just these eleven verses I just read? Be honest. No wonder they fell asleep in the Garden.

Number Two: as Jim Forbes, my preaching teacher, used to warn us, "Don't preach in a prayer." Why not? It turns people off. But then, if they already *are* in a food coma, I began to think (you see how imagining a piece of Scripture has a way of getting you engaged), well, maybe that doesn't matter. God certainly knows what we are thinking and feeling, and if nobody else is listening, it's best to lay it all before God in as honest a prayer as we can manage, including the unattractive bits. Especially those, actually.

And Number Three? It's this "I am you and you are me and they are me..." Enmeshed, the systems theorists would say—no boundaries, not exactly a model of mental health—or else, well, one of my more irreverent colleagues calls it the John Lennon prayer:

*I am he
As you are he
As you are me
And we are all together...*

Well, I went and looked up those John Lennon lyrics, just to make sure I got them right, and I found out something else about the song. It's actually bits of three different songs! Lennon told a reporter that he had these three fragments of lyrics in his head, and couldn't get any farther with any of them, so he just put them all together—and the song became (I love this part) through the vicissitudes of the music publishing industry, Numbers One *and* Two on the pop charts in 1967! So it's a perfect illustration of three completely different things being one at the same time, and one thing being more than one at the same time, too.

So now I'm warming up to John a little bit, you see. Why, I'm asking now, does Jesus pray this long prayer *when* he does?

They're all around the table at what we know as the Last Supper. Jesus is under extreme pressure. He knows the authorities are closing in on him, and he knows he's right about to go out in a public place where he'll be vulnerable. And he knows (John keeps reminding us, as though we'd forget) that he's about to be taken by the authorities through the perfidy of someone he calls "brother"—not just one, though, but, (think of Peter), *all of them*, are about to betray him.

He knows, in other words, that the story of the Church, of the Risen Body of Christ, is just beginning. He knows (as we are about to learn in the Book of Acts) that his friends around the table with him are all about to fall under the same pressure. Indeed, almost all of them, according to

Scripture or tradition, wind up killed, sooner or later, for the crime of following Jesus. So he prays. But what? He prays that they will be *one*.

So what exactly does that mean?

Now, I dearly love an object lesson—most of us do. So let's try something. (*down to congregation*)

Here we have a bunch of linguini. I'm going to take just one of them—would that be a *linguino*? Anyway, here it is, standing straight up and down. Now, I'm going to ask you (*front row*) to press down on it—that's right, use the palm of your hand—and yes! See how it breaks, if it's standing all alone.

But then—you know what's coming, don't you?—if I take the whole bunch together, now try...

(*back to pulpit*)

So, like this *linguino* here, one single person, one single follower of Jesus, is not very strong all alone. We'll each of us, if we insist on our uniqueness, making an idol of individual integrity, we'll each of us, however right we may be, break under pressure.

But all together? All together, we can accomplish a lot. And learn a lot in the doing.

So here we have Jesus praying for unity. He prays that all his followers, Christians around the world, will stand together and be one. Jesus prays this prayer because he knows that just as he needed his friends with him, even if he knew they'd fall asleep and then desert him, so we need each other to be able to be strong. That's a more productive form of integrity.

Now, think about the big Church—all over the world. Think how we're divided, that church for which Christ still prays. There are all different kinds of churches, and all different ideas of what it means to be true to our faith. There are widely divergent assumptions about what church, and faith, and Christian involvement in the world, and Jesus himself, are all about.

Our own listening exercise as a church, coming to a close now, has brought all these different ideas to our collective attention, and Session is deeply grateful for all of your contributions to the difficult, weighty decisions Session now has to make. For the session is also, you remember, bound by our ordination vows to discover *not* merely the quantifiable will of the majority (that's easy), but the unquantifiable Will of Christ—informed, in significant but not exclusive part, by the voices of the people. We truly covet your prayers. And we are more thankful than we can say that chief among all those who pray for us is Jesus Christ our Lord.

But back to that unity/integrity thing. As you know very well, some people we know don't go to church anywhere, and when they're not saying more generally it's because we don't practice what we preach, they say more specifically that it's because of the divisions and the strife among those who profess to love one another. How many of your unchurched friends inform you (as though it's never occurred to you) that "all the wars in the world have been fought over religion?" Well, think about your own family fights. You wouldn't fight, over whatever it is, if it didn't matter to you.

So, as you can imagine, I've thought about all of this, and I think (although you probably won't be able to get anyone to give up their bagels and Sunday papers with this thought of mine)—but for what it's worth, I think all the divisions in the church, all the schisms, all the wars, even, have boiled over in a complete misunderstanding of what Jesus means by being *one*.

Elaine Pagels once observed that Christianity is the only major world religion that is completely obsessed with correct *belief*. And I think that is why we have so many divisions. We fight

over doctrine, but more importantly, we fight over our *assumptions*—what church is, what it's for, who God is, but under all of these different assumptions lies our shared, if seldom voiced, assumption that being *one* means agreeing on everything we disagree about.

You know the story about the two brothers who emigrated to America and set out into the wilderness with their families to found a new community, based on Christian love? By the time they got around to building the church, they built First Church on one side of the street, and right across from it, Christ Church on the other...

Think for a minute about the Trinity. Each Person is completely distinct, yet Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer—are all one. *At the same time.*

And doesn't Jesus pray right here that we be one *as he and the Father are one?*

So how, exactly, does that play out?

Calvin has a reputation for having been stern and legalistic. And yet, in practice, he never failed to set Christ front and center of all our dealings with one another. He never failed to call any dispute back to the Rule of Love. Like Martin Luther, he had a very high view of Scripture, but in our human practice of interpreting it, he insisted always on measuring any interpretation we might come up with against the Rule of Love.

Unity isn't ideological lockstep. Unity isn't everybody doing the same thing at the same time, or even thinking the same thing at the same time. Unity is holding all our differences together, treasuring them, even, in a bundle—until the resolution that might escape us now suddenly becomes, in the practice of our life together, distracted as we are from our differences by the common goal of doing what Jesus tells us to do—clear, and we ask ourselves, “what did we ever think there was to disagree about?”

This takes courage, though. It takes taking risks. And it takes love.

Family systems thinkers call it “keeping well differentiated and staying in touch.” It means overcoming our human tendency to bond together only with people who agree with us. It's hard to do. But it's immensely rewarding.

Hegel called it a “dialectic.” You remember: “Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis.” But that is what unity, real unity, is all about!

Here, in almost two thousand years, and counting, between the Ascension and the Second Coming of Christ, the church has lived and moved and had its being. Here in that “in between” time, how else will we look to the future than by, as Paul says, “striving together in the faith of the Gospel”—with all the ambiguity inherent in that phrase? We aren't any different, really, from those first people huddled there in that upper room—Jesus is no longer among us, but what earthly thing can we do in his name...but be together, all of us, all together, not in spite of our differences, but because of them?

In an editorial on the 100 greatest Beatles songs, *Rolling Stone* says,

After Brian Epstein died on August 27th, 1967, the Beatles were hardly in the mood to be creative. But when the shellshocked band gathered a few days later, McCartney convinced them there was one sure way to handle their grief: by getting back into the studio. When they did, on September 5th, Lennon brought along an eccentric new song... "I Am the Walrus," and, as engineer Geoff Emerick recalled, "Everyone seemed bewildered. The melody consisted largely of just two notes, and the lyrics were pretty much just nonsense..."

*[I am he
As you are he
As you are me
And we are all together...]*

... On the following year's White Album, Lennon alluded to the song in "Glass Onion" with the line "The walrus was Paul" — his way of thanking McCartney for helping to hold the group together after Epstein's death.

Peter, you recall, emerges as a leader right here in this moment. “We have to pick another Twelfth,” he says—and even though that turns out not to be what was God’s ultimate vision, it’s enough to bring them all together; and that first church, that first hodgepodge bundle of fragile, fallible Christians, prevailed, and grew, until here we are, right here, now.

So let’s, in all the differences that undoubtedly lie ahead, turn our vision outwards, treasure those differences, and keep in touch. Even when we disagree—actually, *especially when we disagree!*—we’ll remember that yes, God made each of us completely distinct, *and* God made us so we really need each other. We are, as a church, you see, truly made in the image of God: each distinct, all one.

Won't it be wonderful, all standing together, all different, all one? As John Lennon would say... *Imagine.*

Let us pray, to God for that kind of unity, the unity Jesus was praying for, safe and confident in the knowledge that Jesus prays for his Body, the Church—yes, even for us, still!

Lord Jesus, just as you have prayed, we, too, ask you to make us one. Show us, Lord, how to be our unique selves, and yet be one, in your love. Keep us ever mindful that we need your help to do this, and help us to listen always for your Word of Love in our life together. Thank you, Lord. Amen."

AMEN.