

A New Kind of Oneness

John 17:1-11

17 After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶ “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

One of my favorite Reggae artists, Ziggy Marley, wrote a song called "We Are One" (any Reggae fans out there?). In the song he sings that, “There is a Spirit we all know. Yet, we don’t know we are one.” It is a beautiful song that resembles the prayer Jesus prays when he asks God, “May they be one.” In a world that knows the central truth of our oneness, but for whatever reason resists it, Jesus prays that despite our differences, we can hold on to the bigger picture that we truly are one as he and God are one.

It makes me wonder what Jesus would think about our oneness these days. I mean, when COVID-19 first turned our lives upside down, I have to confess, there was a glimmer of hope in me that this could be an opportunity for us to realize just how deeply connected we all are. That we might rise to the truth that we are all inside this interconnected web of creation and that whatever touches one of us impacts all of us; that we might become more human together, seeing the disparities in our community, putting our petty differences aside, and rally to do something about it. And while some of this has happened, it only seems that the longer we are inside this crisis, the more our super demons are aroused as well with “plandemic” conspiracy theories and a growing contempt for opposing opinions. How can we be one when we disagree about what is “essential” or who is “essential”? About individual rights or collective rights? About something as basic and courteous as wearing a mask?

So perhaps we have to look deeper at what Jesus is doing here. You see, this prayer is known as the high priestly prayer. It’s called this because once a year, the high priest on the day of atonement (or the day of at-one-ment) would offer a sacrifice inside the Jewish temple as a symbol of being reconciled to God and to all of creation. On that day, the high priest would say a

prayer asking God to become one with him. And then the high priest would offer a prayer for the rest of us by saying, “May they become one as you and I are one.” You see, Jesus is borrowing the traditional Jewish prayer spoken before the sacrifice was made, and those familiar with these rituals would hear Jesus as becoming the stand in for the high priest.

Now, to make things even more interesting: there’s another high priest in John’s gospel (hang with me, this will all make sense in a moment). His name is Caiaphas and he shows up just as the religious leaders are arguing about what to do with Jesus. This is when Caiaphas says, “It is better to have one person die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50).

So what we have are two high priests who have two very different understandings about what brings us together in unity. On the one hand, we have Caiaphas who believes that by sacrificing someone else the nation can be unified and resume to life-as-normal. And then there is Jesus, the other high priest, who believes that by offering himself gratuitously we can become united in a different way: as a people who live in unity, not over-against someone else, but in solidarity with them.

Is it just me, or does this sound eerily familiar?

We have those who believe unity can be achieved by reopening our economy, sacrificing the few for the sake of our country. And then we have those who believe that we need to combat the virus, not at the expense of someone else, but through our solidarity together.

One way of thinking says someone needs to be out so the rest of us can be in. The other believes nobody is out, and is willing to do whatever it takes to show us everyone is in. Sadly, groups usually find their identity and unity based on the exclusion of some other person or group--just look at politics or anti-immigration policies, or even our churches who are more known for what they are against rather than what they are for. But as someone once said, “Every time we draw a line that says somebody is out, Jesus is always on that side of the line.”

It reminds me of a story a colleague told me when he was only a few months into his call at a downtown church. It turns out there was a confederate monument a few dozen yards from their front door which the city had decided to remove. Of course, this decision brought protesters with their confederate flags from all around the South. It also brought out the counter-protesters who brought their own signs and words of disagreement. To make matters messier, some members from the church grabbed their own picket signs and stood with the counter protesters, while it seemed there were silent sympathizers on the other side who agreed that the confederate monument belonged there.

Now, we know the meaning of the flag and understand its racist background. But how does a new pastor—or any of us—figure out what to do when both sides feel so passionately about their position? The answer? The only thing she or he can do: talk to them.

So the pastor started by talking to the confederate sympathizers. He asked them why they were there and why they felt so strongly about their position. To which they said that they felt the

monument was an important part of their heritage that honored their ancestor's lives. And after listening the pastor asked: "Do you think that there was any subtle intimidation with that monument or the confederate flag...like to black people?" Their response was, "Yes," with the qualifier, "but we don't intend this to hurt anyone." So the pastor said, well, "if you really mean no offense, but realize that some have used this flag to greatly intimidate black people and their supporters...have you ever thought about flying a Black Lives Matter flag in addition to this confederate flag?" Then the pastor asked if they could have moment of prayer, and then added, "Do you mind if I also pray for all the people who this flag has harmed as well?"

A few days later it was reported that as the protest continued there was someone in the crowd who was holding a confederate flag in one hand, and a Black Lives Matter flag in the other, which really confused a lot of people!

I believe this could be the start of the oneness that Jesus is praying for. A way of being that confuses people, because it doesn't demand the exclusion of one group in order to unify the another. Instead it unites us inside the self-giving gratuitous love of God, who, time and time again, is found to be standing in solidarity with the outsider so no one is ever excluded again. Every time we draw a line that says somebody is out, Jesus is always on that side of the line.

When John's gospel talks about glorifying God it means making God's self-giving presence visible in the world. So Trinity: our actions of grace, of justice, of good, of righteousness, of kindness, of peace, of resurrection resiliency, of forgiveness, of compassion, of gentleness, of humility, of encompassing oneness—it all bears witness to the utter aliveness of God's glory.

So keep going, friends! Keep offering the self-giving love that God intends for all of us. Because if anyone knows that "all means all" it's you. Amen.