

A call to Unity in Christ

This gospel passage is part of what is known as Jesus' farewell discourse – the long series of proclamations that he made before he was arrested and carted off to be tried and killed. Many of the last few weeks' gospel readings have come from this section of scripture. This part that comes right at the end is actually a prayer. Jesus spends his last few free minutes on earth praying to the Father that his followers may be one with him, and in that bond, also one with each other. This, he proclaimed, would be the sign of his glory in the world and the culmination of his earthly ministry.

How right he was. Surely if we in the church could actually be a source of unity in a bitterly fracturing world it would indeed be a sign of God among us. Recently, the human impulse to smear and to shame, to blame and berate and belittle, seems to be reaching a crescendo. No matter what I read in the news or listen to as of late it is filled with vitriol and animus that makes unity seem like a pipe dream.

During Holy Week, the meeting of the house of bishops put out a statement warning about the rhetoric that has become commonplace in the public square - in politics, and religious discourse, and even casual conversation. They warned that this divisive language would lead to destructive actions, as it so often does. They recalled how precisely such a thing is what we reenact in Holy Week. It is just this sort of thing that Jesus knew was coming in his own life, and he prayed that his followers would be a healing force.

He knew there would be fracturing, because his world already was. And the church has never been immune, and sometimes been the instigator. Jesus' answer to this problem was to hold up the example of reciprocal love, as shown between him and the Father, it should be between Christ and the Church, and then between all members of the church and out to the world – those who would hear the message and believe, he says in his prayer. How often we have failed at that in each generation, and how great the cost of such failure has been.

This past Thursday was the Jewish day of Remembrance, called Yom haShoah. It is the day they set aside to mourn those who died in the holocaust – which Jews prefer to call the Shoah, which means 'destruction.' On that day in Jewish communities the names of all those who died in the concentration camps are read aloud. In Peoria, it is done by members of the Jewish Federation and their friends and allies at the plaza of the Riverfront Museum downtown. Jenny and I volunteered on Thursday to each take a shift reading names. There were few people there, and my biggest concern going in was how badly I would butcher some of these names at this solemn occasion. When we arrived, the person with the shift before us was reading names, and in addition to first and last name, she was saying the age of each person at their time of death. It quickly became apparent that we were in a block of names that consisted only of children, and I really wasn't sure I could hold it together.

It reminded me of the cost of our not being one, of our not standing against hatred with the love of God inside of us, of our not pushing back against the darkness with the light of the glory of Christ. I was reminded what that sort of failure sounds like. It sounds like this: Gabbi

Abramov, 8 years old, Josef Liebowitz, 3 years old, Jacob Isaacson, 5 years old, Ruben Goldstein, 1 year old, Miriam Steinberg, 10 years old. It was a sobering, and heartbreaking reminder of the cost of hateful rhetoric and the actions that follow from it.

Jesus knew the price of disunity, of demonizing the other who is different, of dehumanizing those we disagree with. It cost him his life. And to that sort of hatefulness God said a resounding and eternal “NO.” That is what we celebrate in this Easter season. The resurrection was the promise that unity would be the ultimate word. But in this penultimate era of history, we have a long way to go and a lot of work to do to get there.

There are many people here who know firsthand the cost of disunity. There are those who felt that sting right here within the walls of this church. That is simply part of the story of this place. But there are also a lot who have felt that sting elsewhere in the church or in the world, who have now found their way here because of their hope, in spite of that hurt, that this would be a place where the unifying love of Christ could be known, where Christian community could be celebrated, where the light of the glory of the risen Christ might actually be felt and experienced in their own being. And that can be a core part of the story of this place also. That can be our core identity, in fact, in may need to be: that we embody Jesus’ prayer for his disciples. This can be the place where reciprocal love stands over against the fracturing of the world and seeks to hold the fissures together, to show another way.

We get a picture of what that might look like in our other reading. The great image from the end of Revelation shows what the world into which Jesus longs to step would look like. In it the Spirit and the Church say to everyone there, “come.” And those respond by turning outward to everyone else and saying, “come.” Let everyone who is thirsty for this, for what is offered at this fount come.

Revelation generally gives us images that are almost too fantastical to imagine, but this one doesn’t seem that unattainable. It might seem a little idealistic and maybe unnatural, but so does the gospel. What if we created that community of reciprocal love built around Christ by saying to people whom we seem to have nothing in common with, “Come. Let’s hear the story of God’s saving work together and there maybe we can find common ground.” And to all who we would never invite to dinner in our own homes, we say, “Come, let’s break bread together at God’s feast, and maybe that will break down the barriers between us.” And to those who seem alone, or outcast, or huddled in the corner because they have been hurt somewhere else, we say, “Come. There is only one table here and there are no strangers or unwelcome guests and you can sit beside me.”

I don’t know if such acts change the world, but they would be faithful to Jesus’ prayer for us, and they would be an identity for community that was worthy of the Christ we worship. And I am pretty sure that the failure to live into such a calling as a church ultimately leads to activities in our world like the reading of a list of children’s names on a day of remembrance. Disunity has a steep cost, one for which Jesus already gave his life, so we should stop paying interest on it, and instead take up the gift of love, and reciprocate.

Jesus wants us to make God’s name known in the world. He wants us to do it by being one with him and with one another. Not to be the same – Jesus and the Father are not the same, that is why we have different names for them – but they are one, and they invite us to be one with them. Our communities need us to be that healing force because there is so much fracturing

and fraying of our common bonds. They need us to model the healing power of unity in Christ. And so, May the love of God be in us, may Christ himself be among us, and may our call to all we meet be, “Come, and find your place in our community, and know the glory of the risen Christ.” Amen.