

7 Easter A – SJ – “That they may be one, as we are one.”

John 17:1-11 6/5/2011 *St. John’s Episcopal, Salisbury, CT*

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Perhaps some of you remember *Prairie-Home-Companion’s* Garrison Keillor’s first book, *Lake Wobegon Days*. It’s a fair amount of time ago – which says something about the passage of time, doesn’t it? In it he tells the story of the religious denomination to which he, fictionally, belongs, the Cox Brethren, a branch of the Sanctified Brethren, itself an off-shoot of the Brethren, otherwise known as the “Saints Gathered in the Name of Christ Jesus.” The Brethren had initially separated themselves in 1865, in this fictional history, from the Anglicans, who were (should we add, still are?) much too worldly. As Keillor puts it “once free of the worldly Anglicans, these firebrands were not content to worship in peace but turned their guns on each other.” One of the major disputes between branches was over whether it was proper to listen to the radio and take hot baths on the Sabbath or not. One branch, the Birds, tended to be lax about such matters. “But by the time I came along, we listened to the radio on Sunday and ran the bath hot, and yet we never went back and patched things up with the Birds. Patching up was not a Brethren talent.”

Today, as members of a Church, the Episcopal Church, that is characterized in many ways, just as many of our fellow Churches also are, by far too much debate, often acrimonious, and disagreeable, we remember perhaps the most awkward period in the story of our savior and his disciples, the days between Jesus’ Ascension and the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. For the years of his ministry, the disciples saw him, and listened to him and learned from him day after day. But then, of course, despite his assurances, came the awful events of his trial, conviction and crucifixion. And most of the disciples were clearly devastated. The evening of that wonderful Sunday we celebrate as Easter – and actually commemorate at every Eucharist – their spirits were restored. All, of course but Thomas’s, which occurred the following Sunday. And for 40 days (most certainly not a literal 40 days. It’s merely code language for a long time; think of the 40 years in the wilderness, or of the 40 days of the flood or of Jesus’ temptation, for example): anyway, for 40 days the disciples once again had his presence to reassure them. And in today’s gospel, in this long prayer to the Father, which Jesus had

actually prayed while he was still alive, shortly before his travails began, he alludes to his belief that those whom the Father has given to his care “know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.” And he goes on to ask that the Father “protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Now he is leaving them once again. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reports that even now, on the very day Jesus is leaving them to return to heaven, the expectations of the disciples are still apparently skewed, as they ask Jesus whether this is the time when he will “restore the kingdom (presumably that of King David) to Israel.” It may be that they truly believe Jesus has been sent by the Father, but they appear not to have understood that the kingdom he has been speaking of all the time they have traveled those roads of Judea, Samaria and Galilee with him is not a temporal and political one. Instead of responding to that question directly, though, Jesus suggests that a different future awaits them “when the Holy Spirit has come upon” them. They are to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus’ kingdom, and thus that of the Father, is not a narrow one, temporal and political in nature, and for only the Jews, as so many, obviously including the disciples, have for so long dreamed. As they digest this twist, Jesus leaves them again, now for the last time.

In what is to me a wonderfully suggestive scene, the remaining eleven named apostles go back to the upper room where they had their last meal with Jesus and where the resurrected Christ first appeared to them, and there they pray – but, significantly, not only they – also his brothers and “certain women,” including his mother. Why is this scene so special to me? Because, despite so many centuries in which the Church has marginalized women, they were there together with the apostles, even if one can see the marginalization begin perhaps in this very passage, as the only woman whose name is permitted to be heard is that of Mary herself, only one of the “certain women.” Doesn’t the fact that there were women there, though, suggest that the history of Christianity could have headed in another, far more inclusive, direction? And, when taken in conjunction with those words of Jesus himself in his prayer – that is, “that they may be one, as we are one” – doesn’t it lead us to wonder whether something really sad hasn’t happened over the

subsequent centuries, and whether there isn't something the Church ought to be doing to right itself?

Returning again to Garrison Keillor's whimsical treatment of his purported roots in the fictional town of Lake Wobegon: it has perhaps too much of a biting humor in it. Can any religious group be so narrow as to fight over issues so miniscule? But the message, though it's exaggerated for effect, can certainly serve as a mirror able to reflect our religion's, perhaps all religions', tendency to see within its doctrines and practices the one true path ordained from on high.

My homiletics professor, Linda Clader, has noted in an article about today's gospel that from the very beginning the Church has had a tendency to fight over issues of what may be necessary for members to worship together – issues such as whether Christian men must be circumcised and all Christians observe the laws of Judaism, or whether Christians may share a meal with those who are not professed Christians, or whether to be a good Christian you must have certain gifts, such as prophecy or the ability to speak in tongues. So, that we should still be fighting today over issues like who might be ordained, and even who can ordain, or who can share communion with us, or what the Bible actually says about homosexuality or war or capital punishment (by and large, the issue of slavery is, thank God, off the table by now) should, I suppose, come as no surprise.

There is certainly room for respectful disagreement about many things that touch on our religion, and the way as well that our religion and society interact with one another. But if Jesus really meant it when he referred to his Father and himself being one, then he surely becomes a window through which we can see the Father. And it is through the stories that describe his words and works that we can gain insight into what he and the Father would want of us. Furthermore, it is evident that in his interaction with others in the various communities he visited Jesus was anything but narrow and judgmental towards those on the margins. Indeed, the only ones who suffered his disdain were those who themselves tended to be judgmental.

If we want to see what Jesus meant by praying that “we may be one” even as the Father and he are one, I rather like the direction of Professor Clader's thought as she reminds us in the same article to which I alluded a few moments ago of an image that early theologians liked to use in speaking about these very verses and also about how the Trinity –

Father, Son and Holy Spirit – can truly be one. They likened it to a dance as the three intricately moved around one another. And she asks: “What if the answer to Jesus’ prayer for unity was not about solidifying into a monolithic block but, rather, was about joyful interplay, glorious dancing?” If only, instead of fighting with each other over the doctrines, policies and politics of our common religion, we might engage in a wonderful dance of faith together! Perhaps we ought to go further, since the implication of the way Jesus lived his life may well be read this way – perhaps all of us, all of God’s children, ought to strive to find our way into a common dance with one another.

AMEN