

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
29 May 2022

John 17:20-26

There are two men are standing on a bridge: one is about to jump off and the other is trying to talk him out of it. The man asks the jumper, "So are you a Christian or a Hindu or a Jew or what?" The jumper replies, "A Christian." The man says, "Small world, me too! Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox?" The jumper answers, "Protestant." The man replies, "Me too! What denomination?" The jumper says, "Baptist" The man replies, "Me too! Southern Baptist or Northern Baptist?" The jumper answers, "Northern Baptist." The man replies, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist." The man replies, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern region?" The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." The man replies, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?" The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912." The man angrily pushes the jumper off the ledge and screams, "Die, you, heretic!"

This silly joke illustrates a troubling reality that has been developing for over 2,000 years. This reality is no other than the fact that the Christian Church seems to have lost its way and forgotten our vocation and mission. From the beginning the work of the Christian Church was to preach the Gospel to all nations, to teach what Jesus taught us, and to take care of each other, especially the poor, the disenfranchised, and the lonely. At some point, however, we forgot the dual tasks of Evangelism and Service and we went into the construction business. We built great edifices, amazing structures, awe-inspiring cathedrals, and then we began to build walls of separation. We used our doctrinal positions and our dogmas not to build God's kingdom, but to keep others out.

At first the walls begin simply as lines of demarcation. It is important that all denominations know what they stand for and what's unique about them. So, we develop our "Confessions," prayer books, catechisms, and teaching guides. In a way, we build an adobe wall around our doctrine similar to the markers gardeners use to mark the boundaries of their garden beds. But then we go a bit further and we place another layer of bricks on top of the adobe wall, as we begin to define ourselves not for what we stand, but in opposition to others who believe something different, even if it is a very small difference. From here we build another layer and then another layer, until one day, our catechisms become the weapons we use to keep others out. We enclose ourselves behind our walls of righteous orthodoxy or the convoluted rubrics of our liturgy. And we begin to use platitudes for those who don't belong in our box. We call them "Separated brothers and sisters," we call them "Our liberal friends," we call them "Our Fundamentalist

friends.” We claim to love them, but we doubt their salvation. We know we can speak authoritatively for God, so we know with certainty that they are bound for hell. We know God’s mind. We know that God will only save people who look, think, and worship like we do. Sometimes, I stop to think about these divisive actions and the rhetoric that accompanies them, and I wonder what Christ makes of our petty divisions?

In the Gospel of John today Jesus prays to the Father for the unity of the Church. He prays not just on behalf of the disciples but also on behalf of those who will come to believe that he is the Messiah through the disciples’ preaching and teaching. He prays for their unity, so that the love with which the Father has loved Jesus may be in all the disciples present and future. He doesn’t pray that they may like each other so much that they may have a good time together. He doesn’t ask that they be united so that their Church will flourish and be considered successful. This unity is not so that there may be good Church discipline, successful programs, impressive buildings, generous endowments, or even beautiful liturgies. Of course, he wants his Church to enjoy all of these things, but this is not what he is talking about here.

Unity in Jesus’ mind has two purposes and both purposes are related to the world, to people outside of those doors: First, unity is necessary so that the world might come to know that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God. Second, so that the world might come to know that God loves them, just as he has loved Jesus. The unity that Jesus prays for is not just for the benefit of the Church, but most importantly, it is for the benefit of the world. Christ loves the world and he wants the world to know him as the Messiah and to experience the love he has for them. Christ knows that he is the only Savior available to us. He is the only balm that can soothe our wounded world. He is the answer to the problem of evil! Unity in Christ is a prayer that is very appropriate for our Church and our world today. Not only is our world traumatized by all the violence around us, but many of our Christian denominations are becoming more congregationalist, more insular, and more isolated from each other and from the world. We live in a climate of polarization that has caused great pain to the Church.

I believe the answer to our problems is found in the Gospel for today. The word “sent” is used about 40 times in the Gospel of John. The word apostle in Greek literally means sent-out. An apostle is one who is sent out on a mission by another. Jesus today says that the purpose of Church unity is so that the world may know that he is the one “Sent out” by the Father. Likewise, the Church, are sent out by him into the world with a very specific mission: to make Christ known around the world, and to show the world how much he loves them.

We must continue to pray for Christian unity, but Christian unity is not unity for unity’s sake. It is unity to the service of the world, unity that is lived out within the plurality of the world. It is unity for the sake of mission. “It has taken us decades to realize that mission is not just a program of the church. It defines the Church as God’s sent people. Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and

the mandate of the Church.” (Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America, edited by Darrell L. Gudder. Eerdmans, 1998. p. 6).

There are some within our church who want to concentrate primarily on the task of making Christ known. We call this evangelism. Great evangelistic campaigns are initiated every year in places where the gospel has never been preached before. With great zeal, the great evangelists will not rest until every person around the world has a Bible in their hands. I applaud this, and I believe this should be one of the crucial tasks of our Church, as Christ tells us today. Some others in our Church believe that the task of the Church should be to show the world how much God loves them through social services, clean water projects, feeding programs, social justice campaigns, health care, etc. Rather than preaching love, we need to show the world love. I believe this is also an extremely important task for the Church as well.

But once again, I believe that evangelism without Christian service is incomplete, in the same way that I believe Christian service without evangelism is an incomplete solution. The Great Commission and the Great Commandment are intrinsically linked and can never be divorced. The solution to our Church problems is to get out, to engage in mission, to stop arguing about what it means to be an Episcopalian and to begin to experience what it means to be a Christian. To make Christ known and to show the world how much he loves them. Anything short of a reclaiming of our identity as missional people will fail, and our divisions will continue. But lest you think that the mission field is only found in Africa or in Latin America or in Asia, let me remind you that the mission field is all around you outside those doors. We are baptized, resurrected, missional people. This is our identity! The faith we have received is for the benefit of the world.

Let us pray to God to help us be very intentional about our Christian Mission for the world, here in Houston and wherever we happen to find ourselves. May God’s Son remind us of the need for Christian Unity within our Church, and may he help us to be instruments of peace, to build bridges of solidarity, and to actively work towards reconciliation in our wounded and fragmented world. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen!