**ONE LOVE**

*Grace, mercy, and peace to you from Christ Jesus our Lord who prays for unity in love. Amen.*

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

In our final week of the Easter season, our final week with Jesus before we shift our attention slightly toward the Holy Spirit in Pentecost, we are drawn back to the night on which he was betrayed. The night on which he joined together with the disciples in the Upper Room for a final time.

And in those moments, Jesus allowed them to eavesdrop on the prayer that he was lifting up to God in heaven, and in that moment, he prayed for one thing in particular…

Unity.

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” It’s almost as if he were saying, “Dear God, help my friends to find unity in their faith, so that they can share the same bond that you and I do.”

It makes you wonder whether Jesus knew all that laid ahead of the disciples, all the things that they might find to argue about in the days to come. All of the divisions that would form even in those earliest days of the church.

It makes you wonder whether Jesus knew that with each generation, the Christian church would become more and more splintered, as various groups broke off from one another over all sorts of disagreements big and small.

Certainly, he must have been known something, that in some of his final hours, in one of his last opportunities to pray without interruption, he prayed *not for himself*, but for his followers, that they would be one with God and one with each other.

It makes you wonder what Jesus would think if he saw the way the church was continuing to find ways to divide itself at this very moment. Maybe not here, but in places all over the world.

During seminary, my former college pastor, Matthew Riegel, who had then become the bishop of the West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod invited me to accompany him on a conflict mediation visit at one of the congregations he served. This particular congregation was largely made up of two distinct families, and people who chose sides between one or the other. For those familiar with Appalachian history, it certainly felt like the Hatfields and McCoys. Or maybe the Capulets and the Montagues if you’re more of a fan of Shakespeare.

These two families had become so embroiled in conflict that the other side seemingly could do no right. Overwhelmed, their pastor had resigned. And neither side trusted the other to handle the communion elements for fear that they might spit in them, or worse.

My job as I accompanied Bishop Riegel was to sit and takes not as an unbiased observer as one by one, twenty or so congregation members each received 15-20 minutes with the bishop to tell THEIR side of the story.

The first two or three that we listened to all represented one side of the conflict, and as I listened it seemed pretty cut and dry. The other side was wrong. But then, when I heard the first person to tell that other side, it became obvious that this was not a simple disagreement. The truth was likely somewhere in the middle.

I went home that night sad for the people of that congregation, and sad for the church as a whole. To think that a church disagreement could become so heated that someone might have to fear whether the communion wine has been tampered with is simply heartbreaking.

Conflict exists everywhere, even within the church. And even in that particular situation, as an unbiased, neutral party, I couldn’t help but relate to people on both sides of the issue. I couldn’t help but feel pulled in two separate directions. I couldn’t help but wish they all could come together around God’s love.

I wonder if that’s how Jesus felt. I wonder if that’s what prompted him to pray that God would protect his disciples and help them to act as one, to have unity. He didn’t want them to feel pulled apart, he wanted them to be together as God’s children, together as God’s beloved.

Jesus knew that they’d be faced with times where it felt like they were being pulled between their faith and all the other powers of the world.

And he wanted them to be strong. Strong for the sake of the Gospel.

And in times of division in the church, and in the world as a whole. Our strength IS the Gospel. Our connection to all the other Christians throughout all of time and space is our unity in God’s love.

Next Sunday, we will celebrate Pentecost and we will hear stories of the Holy Spirit descending upon those earliest disciples, empowering them to do the work of the Gospel in the world. We’ll hear how people from all different countries were able to hear the Good News in their own language. Unity, in the midst of chaos.

I wonder if Jesus knew that things might get worse before they got better. That there would have to be more division before there could ever truly be unity.

And so, in these chaotic days, we follow Jesus’ example and pray for unity throughout the church and throughout the world, and we put our trust in the promise that God will make all things new in the last day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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