

**THAT WE ALL MAY BE ONE**  
Sermon delivered to St. Paul's Church  
7 Easter, John 17:20-26, Year C  
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The 1999 movie *Tuesday with Morrie*, based on the book by the same name, is the true story of a sports writer, Mitch Albom, and his reunion with a former college professor who is dying of ALS. Albom was a multitasking workaholic, whose life is a series of hurried appointments, rushed phone calls, and last minute sprints to catch a flight. When he discovers that his former college professor and friend Morrie Schwartz, was in the last stages of ALS, he honors a long overdue promise to visit him.

In these visits, Morrie teaches Mitch some important lessons about what matters most in life. Morrie soon discovers that Mitch has a tendency to be superficial and patronizing. Morrie is sometimes patient with Mitch's superficiality, but in one scene in particular Morrie confronts Mitch with some painful truths. Morrie is very frail, and is sitting in a recliner in obvious pain. He grimaces and asks Mitch to rub his aching feet with salve. "When we're infants," says Morrie, "we need people to survive; when we're dying, we need people to survive; but here's the secret: in between we need each other even more."

Mitch nods and patronizingly responds with a quote that he has heard Morrie say many times. "We must love one another or perish."

Morrie loses his patience with Mitch. "Yeah, but do you believe that? Does it apply to you?" Mitch is stunned and defensive as he confesses that he doesn't know what he believes. The world he lives in doesn't allow for people to be vulnerable or for the

contemplation of spiritual things. Morrie pushes a little harder. “You hate that word, don’t you—spiritual? You think it’s just touchy-feely stuff, huh?”

“I just don’t understand it,” says Mitch.

“We *must* love one another or perish,” says Morrie. “Don’t you understand? It’s a very simple lesson, Mitch.”

This theme of loving one another or perish is implicit in our reading from the Gospel of John this morning. Jesus is praying to God for the church that the Father and Son may indwell its members so that they express their unity in love. Jesus knew that unity was critical to the future of the Christian community.

Yet, dissension and disunity seem to be a part of the human condition. It is more natural for us not to get along with each other than otherwise. Dissension and disunity are prevalent in the Church as well. Jesus knew about this fundamental flaw in the human condition. That’s why he prays for church unity in today’s gospel lesson.

Our reading this morning from chapter 17 of John’s Gospel is known as Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer.” In the first five versus in chapter 17, he prays for himself. In verses six through nineteen, he prays for his disciples. Finally, in our gospel reading for today, Jesus prays for us. He prays that we might be *one* with each other. He prays for unity because he believes that if we could be one with our brothers and sisters in Christ, unbelievers might just become believers.

Interestingly, in the church we say that we are one. Each time we stand and say the Nicene Creed, we claim that there is “One Holy catholic, and apostolic church.” (*BCP*, p. 358). But I think you would have to agree that we tend to focus on our differences—how Episcopalians are different from Methodists, or the Baptists are

different from the Lutherans, or how the Roman Catholics are different from the Protestants, and on and on.

Not only do we have divisions between our different Christian traditions, but we have divisions within our own church. The General Convention in 2003 and its aftermath are tangible reminders of what I mean.

It can be as fractious at our diocesan conventions as well. While our last half dozen or so have been relatively uncontroversial, this has not always been the case. At the more contentious conventions I've attended, by the time of the closing prayer, more tension and division had been created than there was at the opening prayer. However, this is far from unique to the Episcopal Church. It's the same with the Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and the Baptists, and just about every other denomination.

When this happens, when we keep fighting with each other all the time, we end up becoming no different from the rest of the world. For instance, many major events in the world right now have to do with people who are focused on division, people who want to draw a line in the sand and separate themselves from others. Look what's happening in Africa, Syria, North Korea, Iraq and Afghanistan. That's also been the issue in Eastern Europe, with the various ethnic groups attempting to redraw the territorial boundaries so as to separate out the people who are different from them. We are a world that's filled with that tendency to divide, to go our own separate ways. Sadly, that exact same tendency has spilled over into the church.

But here in this prayer that Jesus offers at the Last Supper, Jesus is praying that we not be like the rest of the world. But instead, as the church, we are to be guided by God. That's really what Jesus is trying to get at when he says that the Father is in him

and he is in the Father, and the Father has given the church to him and he is in the church. The language at first sounds a bit confusing, but the basic idea is that God is reaching out to the world to bring the world back to God. God did that first by sending Jesus into the world, so that as people looked at what Jesus did and said, they would come to know what God was all about. Now that Jesus has gone into heaven, that's the job that the church has. The idea is that as the people of the world look at us, at the Christian church, and what we do and say, they will come to understand what Jesus is all about, and thereby come to understand what God is all about.

If we show contempt and disregard toward others, our conduct may be imputed to God. This reminds me of an incident in the life of Gandhi.

Gandhi is one of the most respected leaders of modern history. A Hindu, Gandhi nevertheless admired Jesus and often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount. Once when the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi he asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?" Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Apparently Gandhi's rejection of Christianity grew out of an incident that happened when he was a young man practicing law in South Africa. He had become attracted to the Christian faith, had studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was seriously considering becoming a Christian. And so he decided to attend a church service. As he came up the steps of the large church where he intended to go, a white South African elder of the church barred his way at the door. "Where do you think you're going, kaffir?" the man asked Gandhi in a belligerent tone of voice.

Gandhi replied, “I’d like to attend worship here.” The church elder snarled at him, “There’s no room for kaffirs in this church. Get out of here or I’ll have my assistants throw you down the steps.”<sup>1</sup> From that moment, Gandhi said, he decided to adopt what good he found in Christianity, but would never again consider becoming a Christian if it meant being part of the church.

Unlike the situation with Gandhi, if we show love and compassion, that will also be imputed to God. Good examples of being living witnesses of unity fostered in love include the work of many of our ministries at St. Paul’s. Feeding the hungry at 15 Place, building homes for the poor, visiting the sick, going on mission trips to the Dominican Republic, volunteering in the Thrift Shop, for the Exceptional Foundation and Family Promise are all meaningful ways that we can show God’s love to the world. These ministries also reflect our corporate commitment to be one with Christ and each other.

Another reason that unity is important is that we need each other. We need the comfort, instruction, and gifts that others possess. However, unity is not the same as uniformity. Jesus did not pray, “. . . that they all may be the same.” He prayed, “. . . that they all may be one.” Variety of opinions and beliefs are valuable.

Still, precisely because we are different, our unity is sometimes a struggle. Differences can foster mistrust and misunderstandings, especially in the church. However, from my perspective, differences keep us fresh and alive. They force me to examine what I believe. But despite the differences of opinion, I can still be one with

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<sup>1</sup> Dibin Samuel, “Mahatma Gandhi and Christianity,” in *Christianity Today*, August 14, 2008.

those whom I disagree with because I believe the community is more important than our differences. I know that without the community I am lost.

A good example of the importance of community occurred in the aftermath of 9/11. As a country, we forgot our political and social differences and pulled together in the wake of this national tragedy. The Christian community was unified in its response as well, forgetting denominational and theological differences and working together as a true body of Christ. In fact, the Church rose to the occasion and showed we needed each other. This same communal response from the Christian community occurred after Hurricane Katrina when people and money from all across the country poured in to assist with the rebuilding effort.

Our corporate responses to both 9/11 and Katrina demonstrated that crisis brings the best out of folks, especially Christians. The late Episcopal priest and writer Wes Seeliger captured this spirit of unity in his book *One Inch From the Fence*:

“I have spent long hours in the intensive care waiting room . . . watching the anguished people . . . listening to urgent questions: ‘Will my husband make it? Will my child walk again? How do you live without your companion of thirty years?’ The intensive care waiting room is different from any other place in the world. And the people who wait are different. They can’t do enough for each other. No one is rude. The distinctions of race and class melt away. A person is a father first, a black man second. The garbage man loves his sick child as much as the university professor loves his, and everyone understands this. Each person pulls for everyone else.

In the intensive care waiting room, the world changes. Vanity and pretense vanish. The universe is focused on the doctor's next report. If only it will show improvement. Everyone knows that loving someone else is what life is all about. Could we learn to love like that if we realized that every day of life is a day in the waiting room?"

Seeliger is right, of course. The kind of unity experienced in the intensive care waiting room is exactly what Jesus is asking us to replicate in the world—a unity predicated in love.

The world looks at us within the church to see what God is really like. Unity, despite our differences, is critical. Our unity offers the fractious world another model for living, a Christ-like model. Besides being living witnesses of and for God, we also need one another to help us cope with the problems of life. I hope that long before we get to the intensive care waiting room may we learn to live like that. Consequently, in our relationships, in our families, in our church, and in our world, let us strive for unity so that others will come to know God through us.

**AMEN**