

**Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year A, May 28, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“That We May Be One”
John 17:1-11**

in John’s gospel, Jesus began praying for his disciples in chapter 13 and continues to do so in our reading today; and since we are his current disciples—how many times have you heard me say that from this pulpit?—we can be sure that Jesus continues this same prayer for us too; and what is it that he most hopes for us in his prayer?: that we “may be one;” and about 10 verses beyond today’s reading he reiterates, that we “may become completely one”

it does not take any special insight to see the many ways that Jesus’ church seems anything but one in our day; think of divisions between Protestant and Catholic churches; or of divisions between liberal and conservative Protestants--some of that split within denominations and within individual parishes; it seems that any hoped-for Christian oneness is far too often overwhelmed by the divisive aspects of our human nature

Lynn Ellen and I learned about some historical church divisions on a trip to Quebec last year; even French people who were Protestant were not allowed into the Catholic colony of New France (that’s why French Protestants such as the Huguenots ended up in places like Manakin, just up the James River from Richmond); once Canada became an officially Protestant British colony, that caused all kinds of religious friction; but that is ancient history, right?

well, we also experienced some current church division; one Sunday we worshipped at Holy Trinity Anglican Cathedral in Quebec City, which was the first Anglican cathedral to be built outside of the British Isles; we purposely attended the early service, because it was in French; it was a small but welcoming group, about half of which were Canadians of European extraction, and the other half Canadians from former French colonies in Africa; the service and music and sermon were quite moving

but we were astonished to learn, in talking with the priest and some members of the congregation after the service, that the French speaking Anglicans there

are considered a separate parish, and have to rent the time and space for their services from the cathedral's English speaking parish; and this in a place where outreach to disaffected Catholics, of which there are apparently a large and growing number in Quebec, presents an obvious evangelistic opportunity for the cathedral; it saddened us to see that firsthand

but there is room for hope; within Jesus' prayer we are given ways to think and pray and work towards oneness; not towards a oneness that will erase denominations or force every Christian to understand or express the faith in the exact same ways; but towards a oneness that comes from the recognition that we are all tied to each other... through our relationships with God; and that our connection to each other ... through Christ is more powerful and more important than any of the differences of ideas or of practices that may divide us; the phrase "brothers and sisters in Christ" is not an empty figure of speech

notice that Jesus prays that we may be one as he and the Father are one (and you could add in the Holy Spirit for good measure); now without getting into Trinitarian theology of oneness in threeness, the main idea behind what Jesus is saying is that of unity and identity; Jesus is deeply connected to the Father (that's unity) without losing his uniqueness as Christ (that's identity)

one helpful example in understanding how to seek unity without losing one's identity is Christian marriage; the best marriages are the ones where there is a balance between the needs of the individuals and the needs of the couple; in Christian marriage God becomes a partner in that relationship, in a sacramental way; it is each of the individual's relationship with God which provide the strong foundation for that balancing act of individual and couple

this is a model we can apply to other Christian relationships; God becomes a partner in our relationships with all other Christians—in a sacramental way—at our baptism; so our individual, parish, and denominational relationships with God provide the strong foundation for us to share ideas with and work with other Christians while still retaining our identity

this is a model we can apply to other relationships too, even to those with people outside of religious circles; our Baptismal Covenant speaks to all of our relationships when we promise to "seek and serve Christ in all persons" loving our neighbors as ourselves; it is clear that the unity which Jesus is praying for

is one of the key ways that the world may come to know God—it is our best witness to God

people all over the world are split into tribes, factions, political and religious groups, races, and nations which are often at odds with each other; each group seeking its own good at the expense of others; Jesus recognizes that if—and that is a very big if—if Christians can succeed in getting beyond the divisiveness that seems such an inbred part of human nature, that that would be our most powerful testimony that something special is going on among Christians—something so special that it could only come from the presence and power of God

Jesus' prayer gives us one more way to think and pray and work towards oneness, when he prays that the love with which the Father has loved him will be in us too; that familiar song says it in other words: "they will know we are Christians by our love"; in a world so full of hatred, any group that can demonstrate love—looking out for others to the same extent as we look out for ourselves—stands out in a way that again witnesses to God's presence and power

know and feel that Jesus continues to pray for us; Lord knows, we need it; but take heart that his prayers for us are powerful; take heart that living into a deeper and deeper relationship with God will allow us to balance our lives in such a way that we can seek unity with others without losing our identity; take heart that Christ's love has been given to us, so that we can share that love with the world; be Jesus' disciples, and be the church that Jesus wants us to be; be his disciples, and be the church that he prays for us to be