

“Unity from Diversity.”

Today’s gospel reading recalls a portion of a prayer that Jesus offered on behalf of his followers. It’s the night before Jesus is to die; he knows his time is short, and so, he wants to make sure that his followers have what they need to carry on. And in that portion of his prayer that we’ve just heard, Jesus prays for our unity. Here is an excerpt of what he said:

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one” (John 17:20-21a).

As I was mulling over this reading, another passage of scripture came to mind— and on the surface it seemed entirely unrelated. In Matthew 18, Jesus explains to his disciples:

“Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:19-20).

And so I wondered about that passage; because if you're not worried about things like its literary context, it could be interpreted as saying that Jesus *isn't* present with the Christian who is alone; that, it's only when two or three "are gathered in [his] name," that Jesus is present with them.

However, we *do* consider the context, and so we can be confident that this is *not* what Jesus is saying. But suddenly I realized what the Matthew 18 statement lacked: it's the reason *Why?* Why is Jesus present when two or three gather together? Is there some mystical formulation that, in order to conjure the presence of Jesus, two or three are needed? No, of course not! And so, why is Jesus present when two or three are gathered? The reason is that, when more than one person gathers for any specific reason, the odds that there will be disagreements and divisions increase exponentially.

I mean, think about it. By and large, we have all been raised to be autonomous, self-driven individuals, taught by our parents to look out for our own needs, and encouraged by society to "look out for Number One." Our life-experiences have given us unique points of view on issues, unique opinions of how things should be done, our own sense of what is right and what is wrong. Therefore, when we get together, even for a common purpose, it's hard not to want to exert our individuality. Therefore, it is *especially* when

two or three are gathered together, *that we need Jesus* to be in the midst of us, to help us overcome our drive to exert our individuality, and replace it with the desire for unity. (Unity! That's what our gospel is talking about. That's why this passage came to mind.) We need Jesus to be in the midst of us, when we have gathered in any number, if we want to be able to accomplish anything of real significance.

Unity is what Jesus prayed for. However, and as we all know, there are *lots* of barriers to unity, and I want to briefly mention just three.

The first is gossip. In short, gossip is talking *about* people when in fact we should be talking *to* people. You know this. However, you may not know that the book of Leviticus (19:16), which was written 2,500 years ago, forbids the practice of gossip; and that means that people have known *for a long time* that gossip is a bad thing. And the book of Ezekiel (22:9) describes gossip as “tales to shed blood.” And the reason the Bible takes such a strong stand against gossip is because it's a barrier to unity. So, what are we to do instead? Jesus offered a pretty good suggestion:

“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or

sister has something against you” — and I think it’s fair to add *or if you remember that you have something against your brother or sister* — “leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

Let me tell you: on several occasions I’ve had parishioners tell me that they were bothered by something I’d said in a sermon, or posted on Facebook, or wrote in an article; however, they took the bold and courageous step of coming to me and talking to me. And in every case we were able to resolve the matter.

Aside: It’s also probably worth mentioning that some of those conversations could have been avoided if I had simply listened to my wife and not used that particular sermon illustration, or shared that particular article on Facebook. (Happy Mother’s Day!)

So, the bottom line on gossip is: Don’t do it!

The second barrier to unity is negativity. Simply put, negativity is the practice of *focusing on the worst* in people or

situations, rather than focusing on the best. Let me give you an example.

In my previous parish in Kansas, we had a torrential thunder-storm ... and it was on the evening before Easter Sunday. The carpets in the sanctuary were soaked, and we had 18-inches of water in the basement. It could have been a disaster, except for the fact that a bunch of us stayed until well after midnight—vacuuming water out of the sanctuary carpet, and bailing water out of the basement. Looking back on that night, it would have been easy for someone to be negative about the whole event; to gripe about our drainage problems, or our inadequate guttering, or what have you. However, you get to know a lot about people in situations like that, and I learned a lot of good things about a lot of different people that night. And though I hope I never go through anything like that ever again, I can look back and see that a lot of good things happened that night. A spirit of negativity would never allow me to come to that conclusion, but a positive spirit does.

The third barrier to unity is intolerance. And intolerance is *the unwillingness to allow others to be different* from you. And classic example of intolerance in the Bible is the attitude that the religious authorities had with regard to the teachings of Jesus:

They didn't like what Jesus was saying and doing, so they simply arranged to have him executed.

In terms of modern examples of intolerance, I don't think I need to provide you with any examples: you see them every day; and some of you have even been the victims of intolerance. The only thing I want to say about it is that it's a sin; it harms people, and institutions, and nations.

In fact, it's probably worth noting that the *perception* that Christians are an intolerant group has contributed to the decline in church attendance over the past couple of decades. After all, who are the most prominent spokespersons for our faith? Usually they're politically-motivated charlatans spouting nonsense.

And so, not only is intolerance "bad for business," it's a barrier to unity.

I've got good news, and I've got bad news. The bad news is that I've seen examples of gossip, and negativity, and intolerance, even here at St. Andrew's. Not a lot, but some. The good news is that we have reason to hope. If gossip, negativity, and intolerance are barriers to unity, what are the bridges to unity? The first one I can think of is prayer.

If we are inclined towards intolerance or negativity, or gossip, we need to pray that God will change our hearts, and enable them to love, and accept, and embrace others without condition. And, if we've been the *victims* of gossip, or negativity, or intolerance, then we need to pray for that other person, that God will change *their* heart. You may think me naive to suggest prayer as a remedy, but I've seen it work in me, and in some of those I've prayed for. So don't dismiss it out of hand, before you've tried it.

The second bridge to unity is to develop a vision for what is possible; to develop the desire to seek the full potential for ourselves and for those around us. Saint Paul described this, when he wrote to the Christians in Philippi:

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:1-4).

My friends, if the Christian Church is to have any hope of surviving, let alone thriving, then we need the grace of God to help us overcome our inclinations toward gossip, and negativity, and intolerance. And that means that we need to cultivate our awareness of the presence of Christ in each person we encounter; so that, despite our diversity, we can finally hope for unity.

Finally, remember again what Jesus said:

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20).

Thanks be to God: Jesus *is* in the midst of us.

Amen.