

Easter 07 C 2019
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“Shall We Dance?”

One of the interesting things about the Bible, is that, sometimes, the same story is told multiple times. And that’s because, sometimes, someone like St. Paul had a message that was so important that he wrote about it in the various different letters he’s sent to the various different congregations that he had founded.

But, more often, it’s because the Bible isn’t simply a storybook, with a single narrative running through it. Nor is it a history text, setting things out in chronological order. Instead, the Bible is more like a library; multiple books, from different times and places, all pulled together, some with single authors, while others seem to have multiple authors.

And while some of those books provide us with the only record we have of a particular event, other books, like the gospels, tell the same story, but from a slightly different perspective.

And, of course, the authors of all those books didn't have computers; they didn't live in a time of easy editing, or cheap printing. No, they wrote on parchment made from animal skins, that were stored as scrolls. And that means, as an author, you had to begin at the beginning and end at the end. And the only way to make corrections was to scrape the ink off the parchment, which risked damaging the scroll. And if you absolutely had to insert something in the middle of a completed text, you had to cut your scroll and stitch in a new section of parchment.

In other words, the existence of any of the Biblical texts that we have, was the result of a lot of thought, a lot of planning, and a lot of effort. I mean, you basically had one shot at it, because from then on your text was probably going to be memorized, and then reproduced by hand.

So, as an author of a Biblical text, you had to choose carefully what to include in your text, and what to leave out. And that's why each of the gospels tell a slightly different story about Jesus. Each of the gospel writers had a different audience in mind, and so the purpose of one gospel text was necessarily different from that of the other gospel texts.

In John's gospel, from which we just heard, it's not until the 20th chapter that we discover its explicit purpose. Because it's there that the author writes:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

So, John's reason for writing, is so that anyone who reads it might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And, as a result of that belief, the reader could then come to enjoy the sort of life that God intended for us to have. And, what's more, this purpose and goal is hinted at in various places throughout the gospel. For example, in John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

And in John 14:6:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

And, in today’s gospel reading. So, let’s take a closer look at what we’ve just heard.

Keep in mind that the setting is the night before Jesus died. The foot washing and last supper have already occurred. And for hours, Jesus has been talking to his disciples, as they sit around the table. He’s been teaching them, and reminding them, and encouraging them, and preparing them for what lies ahead.

And when Jesus has finished talking, he begins praying. And it’s part of that prayer that we have as our gospel reading today.



One of the curious things that you will see, as you enter the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, is a ladder, perched on a ledge below a window, above and to the right of the main doors. The first mention of that ladder dates back to

1757. Yes, that ladder has been in that spot for at least 262 years! And the reason it's still there, is because that church is home to six different Christian denominations. And no one from any of those groups is allowed to move, rearrange, or change *anything* without the permission of the other five groups. So, in order to move that ladder, all six groups have to agree; and, so far, they haven't.

In a similar fashion, on Christmas Eve of 2011, priests and monks from different denomination were cleaning the Church of the Holy Nativity, in Bethlehem. Somehow a disagreement arose, and a fight ensued; and monks and priests hitting each other with broomsticks. Apparently, it wasn't the first such altercation, but usually the disagreements were about scheduling times for worship services, and times for silence; not so much about cleaning.



Although there is certainly humor in these stories, they do point to a deeper reality: and that is that we Christians are often not very good at getting along with each other. And on the night before he died, Jesus seems to have anticipated that. Perhaps it was because the disciples had been arguing at dinner over which

of them was the greatest. Or, maybe it was because Jesus simply knew the human heart, and the very human propensity to find things to disagree about.

And so he prays,

“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.”

Jesus prays that his disciples, and all those who may come to believe through their testimony — that is, *all* Christians, all the way from the first century to now — Jesus prays that we may be one. That we might be united. That we might be protected from division.

And the basis for that unity that they — and we! — might enjoy, is the unity that God the Son enjoys with God the Father. And even though we’re still two weeks away from Trinity Sunday, here in our gospel reading, is the beginnings of what we call the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. That the unity of the Godhead is seen in the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Three, and yet, somehow, one.

In trying to explain how that all works, the early Church Fathers came up with something called *perichoresis*. *Peri* means “around.” And *choresis* means something like “to make room for” or “to contain.” And, incidentally, *choresis* is one of the root words for our word choreography, which literally means “to write down dancing.” So *perichoresis* means something like “to dance around,” but it’s an informal dance where there’s constant movement, and where one of the dancers makes room for another, and they’re weaving and circling, separate and yet together. That’s the unity of the Trinity.

And so, when Jesus prays,

“that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one”

he’s praying that all Christians will be united — that we will be one — just as Jesus and God are one. And the way we can become one is when we are “in God.” When we are caught up in that divine dance; where room has been made for us, and we make room for others; weaving and circling; separate, and yet together, with God.

So, what's the take-away from all of this? Because it's not just about priests and monks fighting with each other over in the Holy Land. It's about all of us as well. Because there are so many forces outside of ourselves — religious forces, cultural forces, even political forces — that are struggling to divide us, and for any number of reasons.

But there are two ways we can respond to that pressure. One way is to get upset with it, to gossip about it, and to widen the division. But the other is to remember that no matter how we differ, what we share in common is our faith in Christ. And nothing should get in the way of that.

Because our unity — our faith in Christ — is not only what binds us together, but it's also what sets us apart. And when people see that unity, they will see Christ. And then, perhaps, they will begin to believe in Christ. And then, and finally, they can begin to enjoy the sort of life that God intended for them to have.

And that's the mission of the church. And that's the task that God has set before us. May we all be faithful to this task, and may we all be faithful to this mission. Amen.