

B Easter, 7th Sunday 2015

Acts 1:15-17, 20-26 *The choice of Matthias to replace Judas is discerned*

Psalm 103 "The Lord has set his throne in heaven."

I John 4:11-16 *Beloved, God is love and we who abide in love, abide in God, and God in us.*

John 17:11-19 *They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world*

♪♪ *In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north.
But one great family bound by love throughout the whole wide earth.* ♪♪

Jesus prays today: "Abba, Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are one." And what is the name God has given to Jesus? It is the first word of the 2nd reading: BELOVED. And that is the name Jesus has given us.

As that reading says, "We have come to know and believe in the love God has for us." Have you come to know and believe in the love God & Christ have for you? That is the 1st step, and not always so easy, but the gift of love is also a call to love, and that is not at all easy in the world as it really is today. Neither was easy for the first followers of Jesus, the ones he is praying for in the Gospel today.

It was not easy for the ones gathered in the room waiting for the Holy Spirit which Jesus had promised. It was not easy for the people who first heard the song we began with.

The challenge we are faced with is the same as the one those who have gone before us faced. We are called to be IN the world but not to be OF the world. We do not belong to the world around us, we belong to God - who is our Father, our Lord and the Spirit of love within our hearts.

The song I began with is one way of singing the Good News we hear in the readings today. We sing that same good news through the hymns & acclamations at every Mass. The words of the hymn, In Christ There is No East or West, were written in 1898, when slavery was illegal but racism & prejudice was still very real, yet they still challenge attitudes and behaviors and legal structures in our own 21st century.

Persons of different races and ethnic groups still exclude other groups and find it easy to deny their identity and basic rights as children of God. Immigrants are mistreated and deported & denied the possibility of becoming citizens. Men & women with a different sexual orientation are still ridiculed or even attacked. Christian churches are still not completely united. The gifts & wisdom of women are not always recognized and accepted in the culture or the church.

Jesus prayed that his followers would be one, as he and the Father are one.

How can we, here and now, be an answer to that prayer?

We become an answer to that prayer when we gather together, when we pray together, when we sing together, when we reverence his presence by listening to the Scripture together. When we approach communion and recognize him in each other, we become what we eat & drink. We are already an answer to his prayer by coming here to Mass and praising God together.

But the unity Christ prays for is not about wearing the same clothes, belonging to the same political party or liking the same movies. It's not just being in the same Parish or prayer group or living in the same country. It is a unity that allows for differences in the way each of us responds to the basic call to do love, to live in truth and to surrender to God's way.

And it is not automatic, sometimes it is hard work. Sometimes this unity calls us to forgive without excusing and to suffer loss and disappointment as Jesus did in his life & on the cross. Sometimes to follow the call to unity includes facing conflict - and coming to a conclusion that is not exactly what either side was imagining.

If we do not work at becoming one, we can be like the scene described by John Gardner, the founder of Common Cause. He once depicted himself as an archaeologist of the 25th century casting his eyes over the ruins of our own 21st century civilization. Asking what happened to it, he answers his own question. He writes,

"At the beginning of the 21st century there emerged two kinds of people: uncritical lovers and unloving critics. The first were blind to the evils in our culture which they smothered in an embrace of blind acceptance. The second group were those who had no love and could only criticize, cynically and negatively. Between the two groups our civilization and all of its institutions perished."

But this is not what has to happen. The words of John Gardner fail to mention the people described in today's readings. They are the loving critics and the critical lovers, also known as prophets. We are called to be like them and so begin to be the answer to the prayer of Jesus.

We are called, in the midst of painful change and outright evil, to see promise unfulfilled and potential unrealized. We are called to criticize lovingly and to love with open eyes. We are called to be ONE at a deeper level than geography, ethnic identity, gender, class or style of prayer.

If you want to see this kind of unity - a unity that includes and embraces diversity - look at the people in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Simon the zealot was a part of a group that wanted to overthrow the Roman government. Matthew was a tax collector who worked for the government. Yet both of them accepted Jesus as their Lord and became Apostles. I would love to listen in on some of their conversations.

Peter and Paul had a fight over whether to accept gentiles as part of the community. They faced the conflict together & in the end, both of them won - and so did we who are not Jews by birth.

The unity of the Gospel is the unity of the Holy Spirit, not the unity of being identical. We are in the middle of the time between Ascension Thursday and Pentecost. There are nine days between those feasts. This is where the custom of praying for 9 days began in the Church - what we came to call a novena. We are in the middle of the novena of the Holy Spirit.

We become an answer to the prayer of Jesus when we pray to know his will. When the community of the followers of Christ needed to choose someone to replace Judas, they came together as one body. The 120 who were gathered included Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary of Magdala, who was the first at the tomb of Jesus, and other women and men who had accompanied Peter and the apostles throughout the ministry of Jesus. [The word translated as "brothers" in the 1st reading means followers of Jesus.]

The group nominated two, Barsabbas and Matthias. Then they prayed to know what God wanted. We don't know exactly what the casting of lots meant, but in this passage it is clearly a way of saying that God has the final say.

Do you pray to know what God's will is for you? We pray for it in the Our Father, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The 11th step of AA and other 12 step groups reads, *"we sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out."*

I like to use the words, "Open the doors you want opened, close the doors you want closed, place me in the center of your perfect will." But be careful, if you pray that way, the Lord will answer, and you may not always like God's answer. But it is important to remember that he never gives a call without providing the gifts we need to answer it.

How can we be an answer to the prayer of Jesus, that all may be one? We can live in love and truth. Do you know that, in the Scripture, love and truth are married? The two are never far from each other in the Psalms. St. Paul writes, "Speak the truth in love." St. John says, "Love one another in deed and truth."

In today's second reading John writes, *"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God in them."* But in the Gospel, Jesus says, *"Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth."* Love and truth must always be together in the life of a disciple of Christ. Let us continue to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit, and begin or continue to live this verse of the song I began with:

♪♪ Join hand disciples in the faith Whate'er your race may be!
Who serve each other in Christ's love are surely kin to me. ♪♪