**Sermon**

**St. Ambrose Episcopal Church**

**June 2, 2019**

### John 17:20-26

*Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then 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. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*

*"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."*

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These words are from what is called Jesus’ High Priestly prayer – they are concluding words from Jesus to his disciples as he prepares them for his death. In a red letter edition of the Bible with the words of Jesus printed in red, this lesson closes out four chapters of almost solid red.

Throughout these chapters Jesus has tried to comfort his disciples by telling them about the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter, who he will leave with them so that they will continue to know his presence. The Holy Spirit will also continue Jesus’ teachings to them, and to all those who come after them. All of us in all time and space will have the resources and the capacity to know Jesus.

And in this passage, Jesus prays on behalf of them – he intercedes for them, as would a priest, asking his Father not only that his disciples will be one as he is in his Father, and his Father is in him, but for all those who will follow – all future generations. That includes us! We are way down the line from where Jesus stood with his disciples – over 2000 years down the line – yet Jesus is still interceding for us,praying that we will be one, as he and his Father are one.

Jesus is praying for unity. He’ll never stop praying for unity. Because that is the nature of our relationship with God and with one another. And when we bear witness to the unity modeled by Jesus himself and his relationship with his Father in their mutual love for one another, model this kind of unity, others will know that we, as Christians, are indeed of God and from God. If a community breaks into fragments its chaos will undermine its mission to the world.

How many times have we done that?

How many times have people looking in on the church seen division and rancor and decided “this is not for me!”

When we model behaviors that blame and diminish and divide, we are clearly not modeling our divine origins. We are not being who God intended us to be – intended the world to be.

We remember the mission of the Church which is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. And what follows in the Book of Common Prayer is: “The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.” I am not sure of the specific origin of this mission, but it might well have come directly from Jesus’ prayer for us all – that we all may be one, as he and the Father are one.

Beautiful words and lofty aspirations, but what do these words mean? And how do we get there? How do we find unity in our churches, when we often struggle to find unity in our families, when often we are at war with ourselves?

I hope we’ll all think about this – it’s a critically important question, especially at a time when there is so much division and polarization.

It’s also a very difficult question, because I think it requires a very different way of understanding and seeing.

I had four hours to ponder this coming back from visiting my daughter in Boston yesterday.

First of all, what is unity?

Richard Rohr has much to say about this – I would urge you to Google him and watch some of the videos he has made or read some of the articles he has written on this subject.

First of all, Rohr stresses over and over again that unity is not the same as uniformity. It is so clear to him, and I am sure to all of us that God loves diversity – diversity is what gives us the infinite number of species of birds and animals and flowers and trees and landscapes and clouds. It gives us every genre of art and dance and music – every different race and nationality and culture and food. It’s diversity that gives us as Christians our different spiritual gifts, all of them necessary, and all which make up the Body of Christ – a variety of gifts, but all the same Spirit.

We live in a rich and varied world, with spectacular and glorious differences, which we embrace and celebrate.

This I think, is the easy part to understand.

The difficulty arises in how to find unity in difference, especially when there are strong differences of opinion. How do we do that?

I want introduce a concept that may be new to some, but not to others.

According to Richard Rohr, and I am pretty sure, all the wisdom scholars of all faith traditions at all times and everywhere, “the divisions, dichotomies, and dualisms of the world can only be overcome by a *unitive consciousness* at every level: personal, relational, social, political, cultural, inter-religious dialogue, and spirituality in particular.” **“Unity,”** Rohr says, “**is the reconciliation of differences, and those differences must be maintained—and yet overcome! You must actually distinguish things and separate them before you can spiritually unite them.”**

This is the difficult part. I urge us all to persevere. Because it’s really important to helping us understand how we can possibly become one.

There are so many different levels of understanding. The way we see the world as first graders is different from when we are in middle school, when we working and when we are retired, and on and on. How I see the world now is very different from how I saw things in my 40s. Have any of you read C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*? They are marvelous books for children, for whom there is a wonderful message. As older and more matured Christians, we read those same books with the same delight as our children, but also perceive many other deeper layers to Lewis’ writing.

It’s the same with all faith traditions – there are many, many layers of meaning.

As a Christian, there was a time when I fasted all day and proselytized on the CU campus. I wrote pious, self-righteous and judgmental letters to my parents about their lifestyle. Although these phases very important for what followed I would not do either of those things today. The way I see now is very different. As growing human beings in Christ, I think we are always learning to see with new eyes. With the eyes of Christ, the eyes of kindness and empathy, the eyes of love.

So getting back to Richard Rohr and *unitive consciousness*. What does this mean? And why does he think that this is the only way we can overcome all our differences and become one?

To answer that, I am indebted to another Christian teacher, Cynthia Bourgeault, who I think explains this best by using a contemporary computer metaphor: “We come into existence with a certain operating system already installed,” she says. “We can make the choice to upgrade.”

Our pre-installed binary system runs on the power of “either/or” which she calls “egoic operating system.”

That’s pretty much the mindset I had when I was proselytizing on the CU campus and writing my parents moralistic letters. I thought I knew better. I thought I had the answers. In those earlier days, I was most definitely coming from an either/or mentality.

It’s not surprising. This dualistic or “binary operator” is built right into the structure of the human brain. This egoic operating system is a way of making sense of the world by dividing the field into subject and object, inside and outside. It perceives through differentiation. And we have to learn it. One of the most important tasks of early childhood is to learn how to run the operating system. As Cynthia said of her own grandchild who was in kindergarten “at the age of 1½ she was already singing along with the Sesame Street jingle, ‘One of these things is not like the other,’ and pick out the cat from among three dogs.

But, Cythia continues, “when we become aware of our identity using this egoic operating system, we experience ourselves as persons with unique qualities and attributes. When we introduce ourselves, we usually begin by listing our characteristics: I might say, ‘I am Aquarian, a four on the Enneagram, a person who loves the ocean, an Episcopalian, a priest.’

At the same time, that makes other people separate from me; they are outside, and I’m inside. I experience myself as a distinct and fixed point of identity that ‘has’ particular qualities and life experiences, and these things make me who I am.”

According to Cynthia Bourgeault … and Jesus, this sense of identity is a mirage, an illusion.

**How difficult this is to try and wrap our heads around. I have no doubt that I will spend the rest of my life trying to understand it …** that there is no such self that’s separated from everything else, that has insides and outsides, that has experiences – that all these impressions are simply a function of an operating system that has to divide the world up into bits and pieces

in order to perceive it.

Like the great wisdom teachers of all spiritual traditions, Jesus calls us beyond the illusion: “Hey, you can upgrade your operating system, and life is going to look a whole lot different when you do it.” This is what is meant by *unitive consciousness*. It’s when we can see both/and, and not just either/or. That’s when we can be one with one another

as Jesus is one with his Father and his Father is one with him. BECAUSE **a system based in duality can’t possibly perceive oneness; it can’t create anything beyond itself.**

So, the drama of the “separate self” goes on and on.

How do we learn “see” in a more unitive way – without constant distinctions, divisions, separations?

The following are some ideas?

Learning to be present

Learning to get out of the way of our own preoccupations and distractions

Learning to breathe

Practicing contemplative prayer, which does all of the above.

Looking for what we hold in common rather than our differences.

I never forget when I was living in La Veta and had been invited by a married couple to lunch. Both were church leaders, and I was concerned that they had the wrong impression about me.

When I heard them making disparaging remarks about Obama whom I supported, I thought is really important to share my thoughts with them so they weren’t entertaining me them under false pretenses. So I did. The response of the woman was: “Do you love Jesus?” I replied that I loved Jesus with all my heart and soul and mind and strength. “I don’t see any problem then,” she replied.

How else do we overcome the “drama of the separate self?

Through service in love – everyone working together toward a goal of healing, wholeness, and well-being. I am sure that is what our team in El Salvador is doing right now.

We overcome our separateness through Love – the reciprocal love the kind of self-giving love seen in the life of Jesus. It’s this same mutual, self-giving love that is present in the movement of the Holy Spirit – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – each different, but all one – constantly pouring themselves out in love to one another and for the other. I think we need to be reminded that this kind of mutual and reciprocal love is as much a decision and choice as it is a feeling. Although love is sometimes easy and graceful and has the character of a gift, it’s also something about which we need to be intentional – it’s the kind of love that can be commanded by faithful to our commitments through our decisions and choices.

There are times when we have to clearly make a choice about whether or not to honor our Baptismal Covenant – are we choosing to really seek and serve Christ in all persons; are we really striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being.

We learn to let go of our need to be right, to let go of our control, to soften our gaze, to learn to see through God’s eyes in whom, and through whom, we are all one.

Amen.