

“I ask not only on behalf of these,” Jesus prays, referring to the disciples, “but also...but *a/so* on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.” On behalf of those, that is, like you and me who have come late to the grace of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, scripture can feel like stories told only about people living thousands of years ago. Other times, scripture can disappear into rational dissection and scholarly speculation. But then we hear one of the most intensely intimate and personal moments in all the Gospels.

It is easy to forget that this tender moment is a prayer; a prayer that includes us—you and me—and all those who come after us. We are the latest in a long line of people who have been inspired and encouraged to trust in God because of the words and lives of those original disciples.

Now it's *a/so* true that this deeply intimate prayer is so theologically dense that we divide the entire prayer into thirds and only hear a portion of it each year on the seventh Sunday of Easter. But John's Gospel also leaves a small door open, inviting us to be active participants in the ongoing movement of God's love for all the world.

“That they may be one,” Jesus prays. That we may be one with Jesus Christ, Abba God and the Holy Spirit, one with each other, one with ourselves. Jesus prays that unity among the on-going presence of disciples in the world will make God known to the world; showing the world that the love that drives the mission of Jesus Christ is the same love that unites the disciples.

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus prayed for us to Abba God, who gave us the Holy Spirit who never gives up her people, who continues to walk with us through all that may come, holding onto us through the highs and lows of this life, even through death to new life. The good news of the incarnation is that it will indeed lead to the reflection and multiplication of love like light in a mirror.

When we are united in love for one another, our love reflects the love that has existed since before all time between Abba God, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Our love points to God's love for the world like moonlight reflecting in two billion buckets of water. We are not the moon itself nor are we the source of the light, and yet—and *yet*—we are also not *other than* the light.

We are countless reflections of one light. Unified in multiplicity, not conformity. One in harmony, not uniformity. The unity that Jesus prays for is not organizational standardization, but something far more profound. The unity

that Jesus prays for engages a rich diversity of perspectives, a glorious variety of communities and fellowships marked by different expressions of mutual love and support.

Anglicans, when we are at our best, are gently united by three guiding theological impulses. The 16th century English priest and theologian Richard Hooker named these three distinctly Anglican elements “scripture, tradition and reason,” as the supporting perspectives of the Anglican “Three-Legged Stool.”

Part of what makes the Anglican Church the *via media* (middle way) is our conviction that our teaching and practices must derive from an integration of these three. At its best, that integration is dynamic and living. Instead of focusing on settling into a perfect equilibrium, we move in response to God and to changing circumstances. We become distressed and begin to fracture when some of us insist that we over-emphasize one of these elements to the exclusion of the others.

Individual parishes in the Episcopal Church tend to find themselves drawn toward one corner of the triangle or another. Some are what we once called “low” churches that tend to prefer scripture as the primary authority. We now often call them evangelical Episcopal Churches. Others are what used to be called “high” churches that rely more heavily on tradition as the source of authority. These we now call Catholic. Still others are what we once called “broad” or “liberal” churches—not liberal in the political sense, mind you, but broad-minded parishes that rely more heavily on reason as the primary authority. We tend to call these ecumenical Episcopal churches.

Most parishes are like this one, that falls somewhere in the middle of the triangle created by the three elements of scripture, tradition and reason. Each corner and expression has gifts and virtues, and each has potential pitfalls. But what makes them most fruitful is the unity created as we worship, pray, sing and sit in silence together. The point of our seeking unity in diversity is here in Jesus’ prayer: so that the love of God for all of God’s children may be known to all people.

God loves the world in an unimaginable fashion. God handed over God’s own Son to the cross as a gesture of that love. That alone is evidence enough that this love is beyond all human understanding. The love of God reaches beyond all that has ever been captured in Scripture, beyond all human reason and judgment, beyond all human experience and tradition.

Nevertheless, that very God has given us a gift of grace that makes it possible for us to actually participate in the Divine Nature. Jesus said, “The glory that you have given me I have given them.” That alone is sufficient testimony that God’s love is immediately available to us and it is closer than

our own breath. The love of God is planted like a seed in the heart of every human being ever born and is made fully available for any of us and all of us to find and to discern.

Grace is the catalyzing movement of the unity that Jesus prayed for. The glory of that grace is not something that we can slip on and off like a shirt or a blouse; something that is added on after we act or think in full agreement with each other. The glory of that grace is the radical transfiguration of the whole of human nature. Human beings, once transfigured by grace, can participate in the Divine nature by exercising freedom, compassion and love. Fr. Thomas Keating, who is the closest I have ever come to a living saint, once said, “For human beings, the most daunting challenge is to become fully human. For to become fully human is to become fully divine.”

He explained to me that all that is truly required to meet this challenge is to be born and to consent; to *let* God be in us because God has already given us this gift. There is no place to go to get it and, in fact, no place we can go to avoid it. The spiritual journey doesn’t require going anywhere because God is already with us and already within us, and we within God.

God brings people and events into our lives intended to evolve the life of God in us and in those we love, as well as in the people that we encounter every day. You see, the purpose of our unity is not consistency, but the expansion of human awareness of God’s love. Our catechism in the Book of Common Prayer says that the mission of the Church is “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”

In fact, I would argue, the purpose of Christianity and all great religions is to bring all people into relationship with the reality of God’s love; a love that is so inconceivably transcendent and unimaginably intimate that no writing, no thinking, no practices can *contain* it. God’s unifying love—so incredibly present and so astonishingly life-affirming that no words, no thoughts, no traditions can *fully* describe it.

And yet anyone can experience it.

All that is truly required is our consent. We consent to the unity that the crucified, resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ is still praying for. With our consent, God’s love continues to reflect and multiply like moonlight on the surface of waters. God’s love glows from our lives on behalf of those who will be inspired to notice the love of God planted within their own hearts.

That’s the unifying selfless love that Jesus is praying for. How will we respond?