

Seventh Sunday in Pascha
John 17:20-26
June 2nd, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

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."

Jesus is praying to Abba God. It is the night of the last supper. Jesus has shared a meal with his disciples, washed their feet, given them a new commandment to love as he loves, and has told them once again that he would be leaving. Now he prays a deeply intimate prayer that is so layered and 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.

Next year, we will hear the beginning of this prayer that Jesus starts by lifting his eyes to heaven. More than simply looking *physically* at the sky, John's Jesus is contemplating Divine reality. Looking *into* Abba God, Jesus opens himself to the reality that he sees there, and his prayer becomes more a revelation to us than a request to God.

His prayer is so fully energized and guided by God that Jesus and God speak as one. Rather than hearing a list of petitions or intercessions, we learn what Abba God and Jesus the Anointed intend for us after Jesus is crucified, resurrected and ascended.

"That all may be one," Jesus prays, "just as you are in me and I am in you, that they too might be in us." God, through Jesus, reveals the desire that we come to be as closely united with God and with Jesus, our brother, as Jesus is with Abba God. God imparts a yearning that we learn to be one with ourselves and realize our unity with each other.

The unity radiating from God through the followers of Christ makes God known to the Kosmos. That presence shows all creation the love uniting the disciples, the compelling love that drove the mission of Jesus Christ, the same life-affirming love that breathes creation into existence.

When we recognize our unity with one another in *that* love, our lives transmit the love that has existed from beyond all time between Abba God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Our love grows to reflect God's love like moonlight shimmering in the night from billions of 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 that can never be overcome by the dark.

Jesus' prayer spirals around the theme of relational unity, recognizing our differences while integrating them into ever deepening and more inclusive perspectives. We are unified in *variety*, not conformity. We are unified in *harmony*, not uniformity. Each of us is a unique reflection of one light.

In this multi-layered prayer the voice of that one light speaks through the presence of Jesus to say, "I am so that others may be."

And so, as Jesus prays for our unity, he recognizes and integrates the boundaries that make us different from each other. We live in a world of boundaries – some we let serve and some we let separate. There are boundaries within ourselves, our families, our churches and our cultures.

Some boundaries are open to being reshaped and others may be reinforced to solidify our sense of who we are: Distinctions between masculine or feminine or somewhere in between; gay, straight or queer; black, brown or white; Christian, Muslim or Jew; conservative, progressive or exhausted.

There are all kinds of distinctions that we can explore as part of the constellation of characteristics that make up who we are. We can experience these dividing lines or we can harden them into oppositions. Regardless of how we encounter them, the incredible mystery of God's infinite love for each unique person transcends all boundaries to unite us in one infinite love.

Next week, we celebrate the coming of that uniting mystery in the person of the Holy Spirit. This week, we complete the last of the seven weeks from the Great Vigil of Pascha to Pentecost. Those seven weeks have traditionally been the season for leading people through an intensive experience of the mysteries of the faith. Engaging what the church calls the "mystagogy" is more than just learning new information. It is a lifelong process of discernment, spiritual development and sharing the mystery of faith.

Sometimes, all that mystery can feel like a lot to absorb. Because it is.

Let me tell you a story. Late one night, a four-year old girl woke up alone in her room. She was scared and sure that there were horrible things moving silently in the dark: demons, ghosts and monsters. Mustering up all

the courage she could, she hopped out of bed and scampered down the hall to her parents' bedroom.

Once safely there, she shared her distress with her mother. Momma listened to her tiny daughter's fears, stroked her hair and rocked her until she could calm down. And then, hand in hand, they went back to her room, where the child got back in bed. Momma turned on the nightlight and sat on the edge of the bed for a while. And then, as she tucked her daughter in, Momma said, "You never have to be afraid, you know. You are never alone, because God is always right here with you."

"I know," said the daughter, "it's just...sometimes I need to have God with skin on."

Ain't that the truth?

"God," Fr. Ronald Rolheiser once wrote, "having created our nature, respects how it operates. Thus God deals with us through our senses. The Jesus who walked the roads of Palestine could be seen, touched and heard. In the incarnation, God became physical because we are creatures of the senses who, at one point, need a God who has skin."

From time to time, especially in the dark and scary places, we all need to have God with skin on. And from time to time, each of us is tapped to be God with skin on for someone else.

The good news is that, through Christ, God gives us what we need most to serve each other. We hear it in Jesus' prayer: "...I have given to them the glory that you have given me, that they may be one, as we are one: I in them and you in me, that they might be brought to completion in one, so that the Kosmos might know that you sent me forth, and loved them just as you have loved me."

In the profound mystical prayer of unity in John's Gospel, God reveals our access to the indwelling love of God as a spiritual presence alongside our physical and mental presence. Now, we are most often spiritually present with those who have died because when there is only spiritual union with another person, that becomes most important and so we nurture it.

And yet, we can also practice spiritual presence with people still living. We can listen more openly to each other instead of fixing each other or talking

each other out of feeling the way we really feel or relieving our own anxieties instead of just walking with each other.

We can practice spiritual presence whenever someone asks us to pray for them. Prayer is a capacity of our awareness to move beyond the physical boundaries of our own skin and join with the spiritual heart of another person.

And just like Momma said, we don't have to be afraid because we are never alone when we join with each other. To be "perfect" is to remember that God is always with us. And because Christ is one with us, we manifest God with skin on just like our brother Jesus did: by offering the love of God from our own heart to the hearts of others – the love that is always yearning to enter every human heart.

When we do that, then we are in them and they are in us. And we are in Christ and in Abba God. And God is in Christ and in us. And the love of God unites us all through the Holy Spirit, who works to integrate all the differences that make us unique and to transcend and include all the boundaries that make us who we are without making anyone else less.

We never have to be afraid. We are never alone, because God is always right here with us. Even so, sometimes we still need God with skin on.

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