

**PRAYER AND ONENESS**  
**Easter 7C May 16, 2010**  
**Scripture: Acts 16:16-24; John 17:20 - 26**

These two topics--prayer and Onenes--are two of my favorite things. Prayer is so important to Jesus and to me and probably to many of you that are here this morning. Those of you that are regulars here know that my belief in the Oneness of humanity is very strong. In fact two of my goals for my Sabbatical were deepening my prayer life and learning more about Oneness as unity in diversity. Let's take a look at these topics as related to our scriptures today.

Have you ever heard anyone pray privately and personally just for you? Take a few moments to think about this. Can you remember the first time and how you reacted to it? Anyone want to share?

I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade when I went to talk to my minister, Rev. Morse, about my desire to be a missionary social worker. He was so supportive. At the end of our discussion, he prayed for a few minutes about God's blessings on me and my vocation and that I would be courageous and strong. After the prayer, I did feel strong with a sense of purpose that I would indeed become a missionary social worker one day.

In the gospels, we often hear about Jesus going off to pray. In John's gospel reading for today Jesus was doing some heavy duty praying. This prayer is called Jesus' High Priestly Prayer and it actually takes up the whole 26 verses of chapter 17. This prayer happened just before Judas betrayed

Jesus. This had been a very long night starting with the foot washing and then the meal, sharing the bread and wine as representing Jesus' body and blood. The conversation continued with Jesus foretelling of his betrayal and death as well as his giving them the new commandment to love one another as he has loved his disciples. There's also the foretelling of Peter's denial, the promise of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, coming to us when Jesus leaves us as well as several other teachings and promises. This is the last night of Jesus' earthly life. The next day will be his crucifixion.

It's quite clear that Jesus' main concern at the end of this long day and night is oneness with God and with each other. This kind of oneness is one of mutuality, intimacy, and reciprocity. To illustrate this point in another context I'd like to read a quotation that my daughter had in a recent term paper at Harvard where she was doing research on the black Mardi Gras Queens in New Orleans. This quote came from her interview with Big Queen Cherice Harrison Nelson:

*It doesn't matter that they live in Rwanda and we live in New Orleans, oppression has many ways of rearing its ugly head. Grief also has many ways....And here it comes: So you look for common threads, because we're more connected than we are not connected. I think if we celebrate humanity that that would be so much better than celebrating all of the ways that we're different. How can we help each other in times of strife? And when you do it through mutual collaborations...it's not like a missionary thing...because you get as much from giving as receiving, and the giving and receiving becomes...we're very*

*connected to the circle and it becomes a circle, cause you don't really realize who's giving and who's receiving, you're just being...human. How about that for mutuality, intimacy and reciprocity!*

Jesus' purpose for this oneness according to the author of John is so that we may offer a witness to the world. The unity that we overhear Jesus praying for is for the body of Christ to be of like mind, realizing that the diversity of its parts is not a division in the body. Jesus prays first for his disciples and then also for us, for all of his followers into eternity.

The unity that comes from oneness should not be mistaken as uniformity. In fact unity is best seen in diversity, while uniformity is threatened by diversity. Let me tell you a story that I'm sure I have told you before, and I think it's worth repeating. It's about an experiment done by the naturalist, John Henry Fabre, with Processionary Caterpillars. These caterpillars are so uniform that they will only go where the one in front of them goes. Fabre arranged a bunch of these little furry creatures in a circle, each one touching the one ahead. In the middle of the circle he put food for them. True to their DNA each continued to follow the one in front of them. They never stopped to eat even though the food was only inches away. No, indeed! They just kept following each other until they collapsed and died of hunger. I am very sure that Jesus' prayer for Oneness is not a prayer for sameness. If in this church we had only people who were able to produce music, what would happen to the reading of the scripture, to the preaching, to the leading of meetings? What if we had only those people who could

organize and theorize and no people who would carry out the necessary action? Becoming completely one as a congregation does not mean thinking alike, or all doing the same thing; it means uniting together behind a common vision. We can have many physical, intellectual, ethnic, personality, educational and class differences and still have a oneness based on our desire to follow Jesus.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts we are given a couple of examples of diversity in the early church. Paul is in Philippi, in Macedonia a Roman district. In the beginning of the chapter—which was not read today--Paul meets Lydia, a merchant of purple cloth and a god fearer, a Gentile attached to a local synagogue. Then later in our reading, Paul meets a pagan jailer, attached to the city prison—a symbol of opposition to the church's mission. Both these people asked Paul to baptize them and their families. A well to do woman god-fearer and a male pagan are certainly examples of the diversity of the early church. What can we do as individuals, families, and communities as well as churches to break down prejudices and to increase the comfort level for all to worship Jesus together? Maybe it's as simple and as difficult as allowing Christ's light and love to work in our own lives, resolving conflicts with each other, and establishing relationships with others in and out of the congregation who are different than we are. When a headmaster or a CEO goes fishing with a plumber or a garbage collector; when someone who writes books can find ways to enjoy a relationship with someone who doesn't know how to read; when 80 year olds hang around with those in their 20's and 30's;

when a fundamentalist Christian and a Progressive Christian can get together for prayer and discussion, being open to really listening to each other; when folks from this church and the women in the Goffstown Prison can appreciate each other, the Holy Spirit is active and well. When our vision and our focus on relationships and community is in tune with Jesus' examples, we are moving towards oneness. If we carry out our slogan which is on the front of our bulletin: Love God; Love your Neighbor; Seek Justice, Peace, and Diversity, we will be moving towards that Oneness. Remember Jesus is praying for us.

In the end Jesus leaves this oneness to God. He prays to God that we all be made one. I'm sure Jesus knew how difficult that would be; and so instead of leaving these instructions to his disciples, although I'm sure he wanted them and us to overhear, he leaves them to God. Yet we all have a part to play in developing this Oneness. If we can honor and respect each other in spite of our differences; if we can listen to and show agape love to others; if we can be authentically all embracing, I believe we are indeed on our way towards the Oneness for which Jesus prayed. I challenge each of you today to be open and ready in every way possible to bring about this oneness. Let us pray as Jesus prayed that God's love will dwell in us and that we will show that love for one another; not only those who walk through our doors but also to those outside our doors. May the world know that we are Christians by our love, remembering that with God all things are possible. Amen and amen!

