

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the 7th Sunday of Easter, 16 May 2010.

If we were to judge Jesus' ministry based on the effectiveness of his prayers, would anybody blame us for checking the box marked "needs improvement?" What he says is, "I pray that they may be one, even O God as we are one." The church has never been truly one, truly without conflict. Whatever goings-on we might point to in the Anglican Communion or within the Episcopal Church, there's nothing new about the presence of conflict. Sure, the content changes from decade to decade, but unity has never been our reality.

Look with me at the context of Jesus as well as of the evangelist. Unity emerges in the midst of conflict and even violence.

It's getting dark for Jesus. By now he knows there's something ominous in the wind. The streets of Jerusalem are humming with rumors and speculation. Yet he has to be there to celebrate the Passover, but it's dangerous for him. Thomas has already complained that going there is as good as a death sentence. And into this darkness Jesus relies on that which he always relies: the discipline and rhythm of faith. Maybe he knew that the only way he'd make sense of the days ahead was to abide in the rhythms and disciplines.

His conception of, and speech about, unity happens during the meal. He speaks of his unity with God, and the unity of his friends for which he yearns. He knew of the division among the gathered disciples, and it wasn't limited to Judas. From Peter he hears, "You will not wash my feet." From Thomas he hears, "Show us the Father." They're not one, so he responds and says, "Have I been with you all this time and yet you still do not see?" The dinner table, the rhythms and the disciplines, provide a context for Jesus' hope and prayer.

And what about the church of the evangelist? At the writing of this Gospel the church was divided about ritual, moral practices, and who was fit for leadership. Sounds like the Episcopal Church in 2010. The evangelist is not unaware that the church seems to be anything but unified, and yet we are offered this prayer as if it were a matter of fact -- "that they may be one even as we are one." The evangelist suggests that any hope for unity finds its place around the table, in the rhythms of broken bread, poured out cup. We, one with God as Jesus is one with God. We, one with each other as Jesus is one with God.

Jesus wasn't interested in empty ritual that didn't change hearts. He had things to say about how the law, and how it had become twisted to suit self-interests. He also had things to say about leaders who took advantage of their office and whose practice was an abuse to the community. These are not unimportant for Jesus. Integrity was part of Jesus' heart and soul, and how ironic that it's often issues of integrity which keep us apart.

Yesterday the people of Los Angeles ordained two new bishops, both of them women, and one of them a lesbian. And there are people the world over saying the sky is falling. Like the Pharisees, it's hard for some of us to get a God who is holy *and* whose love pushes us to be with the unholy.

Maybe Jesus shows us that being one is more about a process of living with God and living with one another, a process in which holy and profane might get confused. In living with Jesus, what we believe to be holy and profane often needs evaluating. For Jesus, unity is about integrity; and yet, he seems more focused on integrity of relationship than on integrity of convictions.

Which is why the Eucharist, in all its multivalence, is so central...it's about a relationship more than about belief. So it's not a coincidence that the evangelist has this prayer for unity coming in the context of a meal. Our unity is made possible through common feasting at this Altar.

The image of unity that comes to my mind is a Christmas Eve in Maastricht, Holland. I was 14 years old. We'd gone over to be with my brother, who was stationed at an Army base nearby. We didn't understand a word of Dutch, but when it came time to sing O Come All Ye Faithful (it was in Latin) we joined in, because we could! Suddenly a common spirit emerged in our voices, even though our primary languages and experiences were vastly different. The gathering around common word and song united us.

In Jesus' words, we hear that living with God is to live in such a unity of relationship that we're not able to separate ourselves from each other. "I pray that they may be one even as we are one." God gives us food

enough to live in whatever tensions we know, whether they're in our church, in our homes, or in our hearts.
And that food is Christ himself, who gives himself to us in this sacred meal, and who fills all in all