

On Being One in the World in Truth

A sermon preached by Anne Carey at Church of the Holy Trinity, Vallejo, CA, May 20, 2012

Texts: Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26

Ps 1

1 Jn 5: 9-13

Jn 17: 6-19

Let us pray:

And now, O God, may the words I am about to speak, and the thoughts and meditations of all who are gathered here, be acceptable to you, our Rock, our Savior, our Mother Hen, our Lover and our Friend. Amen.

This week I ran across an entertaining website that is a collection of memoirs in six words. The memoir form for the Twitter generation! As your resident Luddite, I may be the last among us to know about it. In any case, anyone can participate by sending in a six-word phrase or sentence that sums up her or his life, or expresses what is most important about that person, or to that person. Hundreds of thousands of people have submitted their six-word statements, some hilarious, some touching, some profound, some just plain creepy. Several collections of the six-word memoirs have been published in book form, with titles like *It All Happened in an Instant* and *Not Quite What I was Planning*. My personal favorite from among this week's entries:

"Letting the grey grow in gracefully."

Catherine Caimano suggests that in fact, Christianity itself has a six-word autobiography and it is this: "Jesus is risen from the dead." "Jesus is risen from the dead." Without those six words, nothing makes sense, Catherine says.

Hearing this reminded me that we are still in Eastertide, that long stretch between the celebration of the surprise of the resurrection at Easter and the surprise of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. During this season of Easter, we reflect together on the gift of the risen Christ and

what meaning that joy-filled gift has for our own lives and for the life of the church. Whoever it was who compiled the particular readings for this Sunday, the last in the season of Easter, gave us a rich resource for that reflection in selecting the passage from John's gospel that we just heard. Last week Pastor Sandra called us to remember that we are a community for whom Jesus prays. Well, I don't know about you, but this morning it felt more like eavesdropping on his praying, , and even though it's a prayer for us, his followers -- maybe *because* it's a prayer for us, his followers -- we might feel awkward about overhearing it. So I have to say that that lesson is a hard one for me to read.

Nevertheless, whatever else the Gospel is, it is for us the Good News, and so, with Thomas Merton, we must affirm that "if [the Gospel] is merely 'tradition' and not news, ... it is not Gospel....If there is no risk in revelation," Merton continues, "if there is no fear in it, if there is no challenge in it, if it is not a word which creates whole new worlds, and new beings, if it does not call into existence a new creature, our new self, then religion is dead and God is dead." Challenging words: but we're equal to the challenge because "Jesus is risen from the dead." So we press on. What Good News can we find in this intimate moment of Jesus with God, what wisdom for right now, today? There are three words that stand out from our text that have life-giving and meaning-making possibilities for us. They are: *world*, *one*, and *truth*. We are to be *one*, we are to be *in the world*, we are to be *in truth*. This is what I hear Jesus praying for, for us.

OK, Jesus: the listening part was hard enough. You want us to be one, you want us to be in the world -- but not of it, as you said earlier in this farewell address in John's account of your time with the disciples -- and you want us to be in the word of truth. My first response to this is, thank God that we begin our worship with confession, because on my own, I'm not up to any of what you're expecting. But if we take our words of confession seriously, we know two things.

First, we know that we're sinners, so we don't have to pretend to be perfect or right, we're relieved of that burden, and second, we know that we're forgiven, freed to love God and our neighbor and even, maybe especially, our enemy.

So, as a modest start toward being one, we might try being one with ourselves. Does what we say we believe match up with how we make our choices and live our lives? If that's an uncomfortable question, welcome to the company of the forgiven sinners. We keep on trying to move ever closer to what Jesus expects of us, and for most of us, it's a journey of inches by inches, steps forward, steps backward. Again, remember: "Jesus is risen from the dead." We do nothing alone, and God in Christ is with us in the struggle. If this resurrection means anything, it declares to us that "God's gracious and mysterious love for the world and for each of us cannot be extinguished." So claims Cynthia Moe-Lobeda in her challenging and inspiring book, *Healing a Broken World*, that we are studying in the Adult Class.

Jesus's intention that his followers be one, as he is one with the Creator, has had a rocky reception, as the contemporary condition of the Christian tradition is evidence. How's the call for Christian unity working out? It was a little encouraging to read this week that, after years of preparation, the Reformed Church of France and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of France are merging to form the United Protestant Church of France. Imagine, Calvinists and Lutherans under one roof! One of the key leaders in this move said it was done "to ensure a better witnessing of the Gospel." And at least we in the ELCA can get together with our cousins in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod under the banner of Lutheran World Relief; it's a start, because it moves beyond slogans into actually doing good with and for others. It's one way we have of being one, in the world. Until the various doctrinal squabbles can be resolved over what are,

honestly, second-order concerns, it looks like we'll need to take the quest for oneness beyond the institutional church and into the world. And that has its own challenges.

We're here, at our beloved Holy Trinity, for one hour, or maybe two, or even five or six, in the course of a week. Most of the time, we *are* "in the world," living and working and playing among family and friends and coworkers. How do we tell the good news of Jesus with at least as much enthusiasm as when we recommend the latest episode of "Downton Abbey," or talk about the latest exploits of the San Francisco Giants? Frankly, do we love God as much as we love Buster Posey? How would anyone know if we did? And can we resist the temptation to become a willing participant in the culture wars of our day, in which it's way too easy to demonize anyone who doesn't share our views? Can we risk the attempt to recognize *all* of God's creatures as worthy of God's love and therefore worthy of ours? The writer Marilynne Robinson puts it this way: "Why not have the courage of risking respect to whomever you encounter?"

Recently I was struck by a similar statement from theologian Miroslav Volf. Taking his cue from the command in 1 Peter to "Honor everyone," Volf wrote that "everyone" includes not only "those in our political camp or with our moral persuasions, but *everyone*." Volf was challenged by a friend who asked if he really meant what he wrote if it included people like the man in Tucson who killed 6 people and wounded 14, including U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords. Volf responded, "Yes, honor the shooter as well. We should honor all folks whom God loves and for whom Christ died and who, whatever else they are, are neighbors we are commanded to love as we love ourselves." So, honor the egregious wrongdoer as well, because God loves all that God has made. I try to keep this story in mind any time I have to engage with someone with whom I disagree. It helps. The church of my dreams is best described by that

well-known phrase, "Here comes everyone." Trying to be one with all of God's creatures, in the world that seems often to want us to be divided, is not for the faint of heart!

Then, as if being one and being one in the world were not hard enough, there is the matter of truth. In this prayer that the writer of John's Gospel gives to Jesus, truth is the word of God. For us Christians, truth is the firm ground on which we can rely, the basis for our life and our choices. As Martin Luther asserted, God's truth is that which, through faith, fills us for good works, works that are pleasing to God and beneficial for neighbor. Our faith is founded on the truth that God is with us and loves us and is better to us than we are to ourselves. Luther writes in that great tract called "The Freedom of a Christian" that in a truly Christian life, "faith is truly active through love [Gal. 5:6], that is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself he is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith." We live in Christ through faith, Luther said, and we live in the neighbor [and, we must add, in the enemy] through love.

Thus we, trying our best to be one, are called to speak the truth of our faith in the world. Honoring everyone makes it possible for us to find how the truth of our understanding may overlap with the truth of the understanding of others -- the truth of other faiths, the truth of other Christians, even the truth of other Lutherans. What are others seeing that we have missed? What are their past experiences that are influencing them, and how do those experiences differ from our own? What is it that is at stake in our encounters with them?

A few weeks ago, John Bennett shared with me a copy of a fascinating article by Andrew Sullivan that appeared in a recent issue of *Newsweek* magazine. The article is called "The Forgotten Jesus," and in it Sullivan writes of the current crisis of Christianity, its distractions and temptations and its tendency to be "of the world." He acknowledges that he has no program for

how our tradition will get out of its dilemma. Sullivan writes, "But I do know it won't happen by even more furious denunciations of others, by focusing on politics rather than prayer, by concerning ourselves with the sex lives of others rather than with the constant struggle to liberate ourselves from what keeps us from God." Strong words! I would just say that the good news is that in fact, we're already liberated, not by our own efforts, but by the amazing grace of our liberating God. We are freed, freed for the oneness that is not sameness, not uniformity, but rather the oneness that recognizes the worth of all of God's creation. We are freed to be in, though not of, the world that could surely use some Good News. We are freed to live on the ground of the truth of Christ -- "Jesus is risen from the dead." We are freed to love as God loves, which is...everyone! This is what Jesus prayed for, and this freedom of Christians is available to us, if only we choose it.

So: Are we ready to be that community for whom Jesus prays? Are we ready to be the answer that God will give to the prayer of Jesus? Are we ready to be one, in the world, in truth? Are we ready to serve God and our neighbor, even our enemy, in all that we do? Think about it. Maybe even pray about it.