

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
The Fourth Sunday of Easter (C)
Sunday, May 12, 2019

Acts 9:36-43 | Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17 | John 10:22-30

Well, a very happy Mother's Day to you all! I was reading about the origins of the celebration here in America and how it is very different from the Mothering Sunday that I grew up with. Mothering Sunday is focused on the Church as our mother alongside the opportunity for those in domestic service to visit their mothers in Lent. Ann Jarvis made today happen in America and she was adamant that it was not "mothers" plural but "mother" singular that should be the focus – not mothers generally, but our own mothers and their love for us that was unconditional, based not on what we are or do, but on that deeper relationship that goes beyond all those things. So, we should be thinking about our own mothers today and, when I think of mine, long since gone to be with God, I can't do so without remembering our annual shared joke based on one by a Jewish Rabbi called Lionel Blue. Two Jewish Mothers were talking one day. "Oy Vey!" one exclaims, "the psychiatrist, he says my son, he has an Oedipus Complex!" The other mother replies, "Oedipus shmeedipus, what does it matter so long as he loves his mama!" Hence, for nearly 40 years I signed my Mother's Day card to my mother "Oedipus Shmeedipus"!

Jesus said, "I and the Father are one."

The late 19th and early 20th century Indian evangelist Sundar Singh was once asked, "What form of Church organization will be adopted if all India becomes Christian?" Sundar Singh replied, "There is no country in the world that is wholly Christian and there never will be, and even if India ever becomes Christian, it will be only to the extent that any of the countries of the West are Christian. For as long as the world lasts, the good and the bad, the earnest and the indifferent, will always be found together. Only if all were changed in heart and life could we say that the Kingdom of Heaven had come, but then the world would not be the world, it would be heaven."

Much is being said at the moment everywhere about polarization, disunity, and the spread of acrimonious hostility within human societies in the West. It is not just America. In the UK, the clash of wills over Brexit, Britain's decision to leave the European Union, has produced a similar widening of divisions in British society.

It is hard to step back and look at these things with any balance, because we are all involved in these struggles ourselves. We all have our opinions and we all lean to one side or the other on most of the issues that define the fissures that seem to crack and widen in our communities before our very eyes.

As Christians, we have not done very well at showing how Christ and the Christian faith, truly practiced, is actually an alternative to bitterness and division. Even if, as Sundar Singh says, "the world will always be the world," Christianity claims that it is still possible for us to be changed in heart and mind enough to belong in the one-fold of the one shepherd, together. To accept Christ as the one shepherd of our souls means that we belong together in a way that none of the disagreements or divisions about the nuts and bolts of how our world should be run, can alter.

Thanks to a very kind parishioner, Lorraine and I just celebrated our 30th Wedding Anniversary by the Pacific Ocean in Mexico. After all those years we are one, if not, of course, in the way or on the level that Jesus and the Father are one, yet on as profound a level as I have ever known. Not that we agree all the time of course! We don't. The irresistible force and the immovable object analogy comes to mind! You can guess between us, which is which! Not that we are the same in every way. We are absolutely not. Indeed, in some ways we are very, very different. Yet, we have become fundamentally one, one flesh as the wedding service, of course, says. Our fortunes, our happiness, our struggles all belong to both of us equally. What affects the one for good or ill, affects both.

We began working on a list of 30 lessons learnt in 30 years. It is not a list that any of you will ever see, I have to say! But, first on the list, is "Perseverance pays, spiritually, emotionally, and in every way." No couple becomes one flesh without enduring many knocks and injuries, many painful adjustments that change, batter, and mold us into something that is so connected that all differences are superficial in comparison to that connectedness.

David Brooks, author of "The Road to Character," was speaking at the Cathedral last week, and he reminded me of some wonderful words on this very theme by the author Louis de Bernieres, in his famous book "Captain Corelli's Violin."

"Love is not breathlessness, it is not excitement, it is not the promulgation of promises of eternal passion. That is just being "in love" which any of us can convince ourselves we are. Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away, and this is both an art and a fortunate accident. Your mother and I had it, we had roots that grew towards each other underground, and when all the pretty blossom had fallen from our branches, we found that we were one tree and not two."

There is a practicality about this image I like, and a meaning that is closer to a true Christian understanding of love than it first seems.

Today's Gospel sounds profoundly philosophical. St. John's account is, after all the theological Gospel. In it we have the highest and most developed Christology in the New Testament. Immediately after Jesus says, "I and the Father are one," the account says, "The Jews again lifted up stones to throw at him." And no wonder! To claim to be one with God is an outrageous claim. To be, as we say each week in the Nicene Creed, that he is;

"God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father"

And yet, while all that is true, when Jesus says that he and the Father are one here, I don't think he is talking about substance or essence or being as such. I think he is speaking in a language much more familiar to us, the language of relationship. Not hypostatic union, a union of being, but the union of heart and mind and life. We can know nothing of the union of being, or substance, however real that is, but we do know something of the union of heart and mind such as any married couple, in a marriage that has somehow, through thick and thin, worked out.

What is unity of heart and mind, but love? Not the gushy emotional sentimentality that is so often passed off as love, (too often in the Church as much as in romantic fiction) but the hard, practical,

painful, and real love that is born of conscious and deliberate sacrifice, forgiveness, and, yes, not least, perseverance.

Jesus says, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."¹ "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me."²

Here is the essence of the matter. The bond of unity is love; the proof of love is obedience. Christians are one with each other when they are bound by love and obedience to Christ.

This really is an alternative to bitterness and division. Not that we will all agree, or that we will all be the same, or that we will not get some things terribly, terribly wrong at times, but that, if we seek to obey Christ, then our roots will be growing together under the surface of our differences and we will be made increasingly one flock, however ragged, varied, or troublesome sheep we might be externally.

Sunder Singh put it this way – “About the Church: people are continually introducing changes in worship and creating new sects, but they are not satisfied with any of them. The real need is not that we should adopt new forms, but that through the Living Christ, rivers of living water should begin to flow through us.”

The same might be said of human society more widely. We can easily become obsessed with systems and tribes and policies, when none of those things ever satisfy us. Indeed, they only tend to divide us further and fill us with anger and resentment. What the world really needs are those same rivers of living water that we seek here week by week. The rivers that flow from this altar and through all the kindness and affection of our common life as people and a Church, and that flow from our obedience to Christ.

So, as we think of the unity that we find in Christ, we might well look at each other when we disagree about all the issues of the day, and recognize that yes, some of these arguments are critical, and perhaps must, in the end, sadly, divide us, but for most of them, can we not say, as our mothers might well say, “Oedipus Shmeedipus, what does it matter, so long as you love the Lord and each other!”

¹ John 15:10

² John 14:21