

Sermon for Easter 7/Ascension, Year C

THE TEXT: John 17:20-26

JOHN 17:20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.²⁴ "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.²⁵ "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

In a comedy skit a few years back there were two office workers talking with each other via their mobile phones. The camera switched back and forth alternately each person as they progressed in their conversation. Nothing funny there...until the camera panned out and both the office workers were in the same room talking to each other from a few metres away!

What some comedy sketch writers saw as funny a few years back has now really become reality. The irony in today's western world is that there is a heightened focus on connecting and communicating through technology—we can twitter and tweet and Facebook and SMS each other—but what is seen as bringing us together is actually not interpersonal communication at all. The internet and our telecommunications providers have brought the world to our fingertips so that we can have what we want when we want it. So we are increasingly communicating behind screens in isolation.

The art of communication has evolved, at least in the Western world, to how economical we can be with language in order to send our message quicker, because we want information instantly rather than conversation. Families can be together in the same

home, yet individually separate on phones, iPads and computers. We are increasingly banking online rather than talking to a teller, we are increasingly shopping online rather than have a chat to the salesperson. Globalization means that the milky and baker no longer visit our door. Distance education through internet is fast becoming the default mode of learning in the student's own lounge room, while it seems there is nothing you can't teach yourself from watching You-tube. I'm not saying these things are necessarily wrong but what I do think it means is that we need to rediscover connecting in authentic community. I wonder if humanity even really knows how to personally communicate any more. Hasn't it become a habit that when we are waiting in public with others around us we reach in our pockets for the iPhone desperately hoping that some messages might have come through because we feel awkward talking to the other person standing right next to us.

I think the irony is that the western world does know that it needs relationships, but the very way it has tried to engage in that has reinforced separateness and individualism. What, as the church, can we offer the world seeking meaning, purpose, and trusting relationships? In today's Gospel reading John shares with us the ultimate concern of the Saviour who prays that we might believe that God loves us and is seeking a deep personal relationship with us. In our text Jesus prays: "Righteous Father...I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

The theme from Jesus today is living in unity with God and each other. And with that brings the concept of really connecting and really relating at a deep, interpersonal level. Jesus says, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one" This is part of what is known as Jesus' High Priestly prayer—Jesus' prayer for his people before he was crucified for the sake of the world. Jesus didn't pray for himself but for us. He wasn't self-centred but God centred. One of the things he prayed for is "that they may be one even as we" (that is Jesus, the Son, and his Father) are one, perfectly one."

Whether we like it or not being a Christian brings us into community. God has made us part of a family—his family. He has brought us sinners together, put us into communion with a whole lot of people we're going to disagree with, a whole bunch of people you may not even like. We are in the communion of saints, saints yet sinners, who sin against each other. But the Lord calls you to break bread with one another and drink wine with one another.

We're pretty good at saying we're sinners, but not so good at confessing how we've sinned in particular ways. We're not so good at confessing that we've broken the fourth commandment to honour our Father and Mother and by extension all those in authority as the people God has called to serve us. I've heard it said that "God gave us two ears and one mouth so he must have meant for us to do twice as much listening as talking." We're not particularly good at keeping the eighth commandment: not to bear false witness against our neighbour, because God would have us speak well of our neighbour and defend them. Yet often we disregard this and the warning of Proverbs 13:3 "He who guards his lips guards his soul". We justify ourselves: "They deserved it" or "They had it coming to them", or "They started it". When we think of the fifth commandment "You shall not kill" we could pretty safely dodge that one...except Luther explained it to mean that we should not hurt our neighbour in anyway, but help them in all their physical needs. This is what Paul means in Galatians 6 when he says: Let us not be weary in doing good; for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity let us do good.'

A bit later again, today, we are going to pray: "Forgive us our sins as (or in the same way/by the same standard) that we forgive those who sin against us." Often we're good at rationalising and justifying why we have failed to forgive others.... "They started it. They deserved it. They had it coming to them..." Let's not just mechanically mouth those words in the Lord's prayer but actually seek to do them...to restore, forgive, free our brothers and sisters, and to ask for that same forgiveness in the times we have sinned against another. All of these and more is what is involved in growing in interpersonal relationships and in relationship with God as his people, and all of this is what is involved in our confession this morning that we would strive daily to lead a holy life. Not leading a holy life in isolation—now that takes vulnerability and risk—but the fruit is real togetherness. The glory that God gave to Jesus came to its' fullest expression in the cross. Now Jesus gives that same glory, that is, the cross, to His followers. The cross is given to them "that they may be one, as we are one." The oneness of God is demonstrated and lived out in the cross. In that light, to fight among ourselves as the followers of Jesus is to deny the cross. To take control is yet another way to deny it. To demand our own way. To push people away because we are scared of being hurt in our vulnerability is to deny the cross.

Jesus says in the Gospel today: "I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and You in Me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that You sent Me and have loved them even as

You have loved Me." How will the world know that the Father sent Jesus and loved them even as He has loved His Son? By unity.

But not a superficial unity. Not just a simple gathering together. But in the kind of community where everyone is given the freedom to express different perspectives and opinions and are still valued. A unity that does not paper over concerns but that engages those involved to admonish and reconcile. The world will know that the Father sent Jesus and loved His church in the same way as He loves His Son because Christ will be at work in this broken but redeemed holy community. Whereas the world would wipe off those who hurt others, those who don't measure up, those who have messed up, those who we're not comfortable with or feel threatened by, the world should be able to look at the church and see a community of people daily loving, forgiving, helping, serving even those they don't particularly like.

And so in a society where personal selfishness leading to isolation and ultimately implosion is the default, we as the church have something authentically different to offer. People who centre themselves in God focus less on themselves and set their first concern for others. How different might our relationships or our community be if we recognized that in the very conflict that we see as failure, are in fact an opportunity to humbly throw ourselves on God's grace to be restored to one another and grow in the freedom of the forgiveness of sins? How different might our relationships and our community be if we looked to each other as bearers of a divine encounter, a chance to hear and touch the Lord? What changes might occur in our lives if we would chance being curious about where Jesus might be in the person who sits next to us in worship, or the person who holds a church office, or the person who welcomes us to share a ministry, or the person who just walked in the door for the first time—and how we can serve them as part of the one body? Could it be possible to live in a church where every person on our membership list rings each other to find out how they are doing, even those we normally don't talk with, even those we don't like, even those who have sinned against us, even those who might be new visitors to our church? Instead of assuming that someone else has made contact with them, would we do it? Would we ask how we can help them, would we pray for them on a much deeper level than the weekly printed mention of family names in the bulletin? Would we dare to connect in such a personal way and be bearers of grace and love that strengthens partnerships in Christ's church for the sake of serving the world and which God might actually use to bring others to know the Saviour and so be rescued from hell? Let's not just talk about that, let's do it—because the amazing thing is that God gives us a part to play in making the world new as He renews His church through His holy word and

sacraments. Don't ever think that who you are, what you do or say, is unimportant, that you make no difference in the eternal scheme of things. When we cast self-centeredness aside by God's grace and love, we begin to love like Jesus loves. That's His promise. Jesus shows us God's heart today, that He is not concerned with stockpiling blessing for Himself, but that He shares it with the world, to draw sinners into His presence and grant them fullness of life. God in Christ actively sought lepers, the ritually unclean, mentally and physically ill, tax collectors, the demon possessed, women, children, non-Jews and all of those considered to be the 'outsiders' in society. And it was while we were sinners—while we were outsiders—that Christ died for us to forgive us all our sins and restore us to life in Himself, to make us 'insiders' with God. It is through Christ crucified for you that God the Father loves you with the same love He has for His Son Jesus. The Son He sent for you to suffer and die as the price to pay for all of your sins. It is through Jesus that you are brothers and sisters who together will be where He is in heaven to behold His glory with all those who are also His saints. Are you ready to really connect? Really relate? God is. Through the shed blood of His Son He made the way for you to be His holy and pure people, a part of His family, and freed you to be vessels of grace and true love to one another. May the world look at us and say: "I want that too". Amen.