

Message for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year B (5/16/2021)
John 17:6-19

Whenever I feel frustrated with the world of Christianity, I think of Jesus' words in our Gospel from John today: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." If Christian unity rests on theological agreement or political accord or cultural harmony or consistency in spiritual practices, then we have yet to achieve anything approaching unity in the 2,000-year history of our faith. And, the fact of our disunity isn't about to change anytime soon. I often look around at the variety of Christian expressions today and wonder if we're all reading the same Scripture and following the same Jesus.

Unity doesn't come naturally to the church. And, even where we've tried, we've often pressed for uniformity instead. American Christianity has an especially harmful history of suppressing the diversity of Indigenous peoples in the land we all came to occupy. Beginning in the 19th century, for instance, in partnership with the United States government, the church established hundreds of Indian boarding schools with the aim of assimilating Indigenous children and eradicating Indigenous culture. Children were forcibly removed from their homes and families, stripped of their language, and routinely abused, all in the name of "civilizing" and "Christianizing" them. Richard Pratt, the army officer who led the first Indian boarding school, summed up his approach in brutally

honest fashion: “Kill the Indian in [a person], and save the man.”¹ There is nothing of Christ in this violent chapter of our history; nevertheless, we have yet to fully reckon with it.

What’s more, **we continue to insist on assimilation**, albeit in subtler ways. Potawatomi Christian author and speaker Kaitlin Curtice describes how her journey to rediscover and celebrate her Indigenous identity has met with painful resistance in the church. She left her position in a congregation because she sensed a growing tension between her role in leadership and her desire to live authentically as a Potawatomi woman. She recalls, “I was suddenly struck with the reality that if I fight the effects of assimilation in my life, *if I speak from my Potawatomi self instead of the whiteness I’ve been trained and taught to live through*, the church will increasingly see me as a threat. They will get *uncomfortable*, and they will question my faith, because it doesn’t look like the faith shaped by the forefathers of the church. In essence, the church wants what is white in me, but not what is Native in me.”²

***Come and be like us*, we invite our neighbors. But, while assimilation may gratify those whose identity and culture others are compelled to adopt, assimilation is not what Jesus expects of his followers. Uniformity is not unity.**

¹ As cited by Kaitlin B. Curtice in *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God*, 60.

² Ibid. 82.

I question whether the church will ever be able to celebrate both our oneness in Christ and our diversity; I wonder whether we're capable of reflecting God's limitless creativity even as we aspire to walk together in the way of Jesus. But, if I'm tempted to give up hope, I'm reminded that Jesus' words about unity in our Gospel today are directed to God, not to the disciples. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' final act on behalf of his followers is to commend us to God: "Holy Father, protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one." It's not a commandment, but a prayer.³

That changes the equation. **Jesus doesn't leave the matter of unity in our hands, but in God's. If we are one, it's only because God gathers us, even in spite of ourselves, into the body of Christ by grace. And, that grace doesn't suppress difference; rather, it invites us to know and embrace the fullness of our identity and the identity of others.** Kaitlin Curtice writes, "I engage in a holistic faith in which I cannot compartmentalize or separate the various parts of who I am or what I believe, which means journeying must include *all of me, all of us*. If we were all to engage in this way of belief for ourselves and those around us, we would see that God is truly in our midst."⁴

I have the privilege of gathering weekly for a text study with local preachers from several denominations and backgrounds. It's always a rich discussion, and I walk away grateful for the range of insights these gifted people

³ See Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 797.

⁴ *Native* 16.

have to share. Recently, we've welcomed a Jesuit novitiate, a Catholic priest in training, to join us in conversation as he lives temporarily with the community at L'Arche Tahoma Hope. This was his last week in Washington before returning to the novitiate house in Southern California, so at the conclusion of text study, we offered him a prayer of blessing and Godspeed. He then expressed gratitude for what he described as sacred time during which we all became partners in his formation as a Jesuit leader. Given the hostility that so often divides Christian traditions, this was no small thing. Perhaps in that instance, Jesus' prayer for unity was answered.

Friends, diversity not a reality to tolerate, but to celebrate. And, even as we navigate the complexities of diversity in the church, in our communities, and throughout the world, even as we struggle to acknowledge and honor our differences, we can trust that Christ intercedes for us: "Holy Father, protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one." The Apostle Paul writes, "In Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near.... For he is our peace; in his flesh he has [already] made [us] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."⁵

Will we live like that's true?

⁵ Ephesians 2:13-14.