

C Easter 7
 May 12, 2013
 Psalm 97
 Acts 16.16-34
 Revelation 22.12-21
 John 17.20-26

Today I will begin with a few of those denominational light bulb jokes, which I am pretty sure I have used before with you, but they are a great introduction to the theme of today's reading from John's gospel. So here we go.

- How many **Pentecostals** does it take to change a light bulb?
 Ten. One to change the bulb and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.
- How many **Catholics** does it take to change a light bulb?
 None. Catholics use only candles.
- How many **Episcopalians** does it take to change a light bulb?
 Six. One to call the electrician, and five to say how much they liked the old light bulb better.
- How many **Baptists** does it take to change a light bulb?
 At least 15. One to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who brings the potato salad.
- How many **Nazarenes** does it take to change a light bulb?
 Two. One to change the bulb. Another to replace the new with the old after shaking it and finding it can be revived with a second blessing.
- How many **Lutherans** does it take to change a light bulb?
 None. Lutherans don't believe in change.
- How many **Presbyterians** does it take to change a light bulb?
 None. Lights will go on and off at predestined times.
- How many **Amish** does it take to change a light bulb?
 What's a light bulb?

Over the past several weeks, our gospel lessons have been taken from John, chapters 13 to 17. The drama is set in the evening when Jesus will be betrayed by Judas, arrested by the temple guard, and brought before Caiaphas, the high priest. Most of these five chapters consist of a long series of teachings that Jesus gives to his disciples. The speech is called the "farewell discourse," because it is Jesus' final words to his disciples, his last attempt to prepare them for his departure, the summary of all of his previous instruction, and his effort to strengthen his little band of followers to minister in his name after he has returned to his Father.

In chapter 17, the last chapter of the farewell discourse, Jesus prays for himself and for his followers, both those who surround him on that night, and the millions more who would follow him in the centuries to come. That includes you and me. This prayer has also been given a name by Biblical scholars: the high priestly prayer.

That theme of oneness runs throughout the farewell discourse, and indeed, throughout John's gospel. It is implicit in Jesus' repeated calls for us to love one another, in his plea for us to abide in him, to be connected to him as branches are connected to a vine. It becomes clear in the farewell discourse that, even with the aid and support of the Holy Spirit, the disciples of Jesus must take serious responsibility for keeping his commandments, and for teaching them to others. That means you and me, too.

Jesus prays to his Father that those gathered around him on that night will be one, and also those who will believe in him through their words. This chain of oneness extends from those who walked with Jesus through the infant church whose birth we will celebrate next week. It extends through the early church leaders and the martyrs of the second and third and fourth centuries. It extends through the medieval ages and through the courageous leaders of the protestant reformation. Right up to the present day. Jesus prays that we will all be one, all of us who follow him and believe in him. It is implicit that you and I bear the responsibility of telling the good news to others, so that they may believe and follow, also. Jesus prays for us as we, also, evangelize in his name.

The oneness that Jesus advocates extends even beyond the many generations of those who follow him. That oneness reaches much deeper. The oneness that you and I experience is also oneness with Jesus himself, and with the Father. Jesus prays, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one." You are one with the person sitting next to you. You are one with all the saints, past, present, and future, who follow the living Christ and obey his commandments. You are one with him and with the Father, by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Careful readers of John's gospel recognize that he repeatedly drops hints about the triune nature of God, that God is one God, and yet Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This passage contains another one of those hints: Jesus says that he and his Father are one. Our understanding of the Trinity is only partial at best, and the church struggled mightily with this doctrine during its first few hundred years. The triune God, one God in three so-called "Persons" is a mystery for all of us, and many of us wonder what difference it makes. We will deal more with this amazing characteristic of God in just a couple of weeks, the day we call Trinity Sunday.

All of scripture tells us this: God is a God whose very essence, whose very being, requires relationship and love, because that is what the three Persons of the Trinity express for each other. God's essential nature is love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus says in today's text, "you loved me before the foundation of the world." So we humans, made in the image of God, are also designed for relationship and love. Think how different things would be without our understanding of the intimate, loving Trinity. That's one big difference that our understanding of the Trinity makes. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and these three share a deep, abiding, intimate love. So must we. With God, and with each other.

Jesus' prayer for us is that we be more than just a conglomeration of individuals, all of whom are joined to achieve a common, and highly desirable goal. We are not bound together by an objective. We are bound together in love, by the working of the Holy Spirit. We are bound together with each other, with the Father, with the Son, and with the Holy Spirit. One.

Did you notice how often Jesus uses the little preposition "in" throughout this passage? And not only here, but throughout John's gospel. Jesus says that the Father is in him, and he is in the Father, so we are to be in them both. The Greek word translated as "in" sounds almost exactly the same, and, at least in its context here, means almost exactly the same thing. It is one of those Greek words that has been carried over almost completely into English. A Greek dictionary says that it means "under the control of, under the influence of, in close association with." One.

Oneness is obviously not uniformity. To be one does not mean that we are all the same, nor that we need to think the same. We clearly don't. There are as many different personalities, as many different understandings of the gospel, as many different priorities in our Christian vocations, as there are saints gathered in this room. Jesus prays that we will be one in spite of those, and that we will love one another in word and deed, in spite of those. It does us good to keep that in mind when we have differences over matters, both trivial and not. Jesus prays that we will be one. And that makes all the difference in the world.

You may be aware that denominational loyalty is pretty much a thing of the past. Nowadays Methodists will move from one town to another and become Presbyterians. And vice-versa. Baptists will become non-denominational. And vice-versa. Among those who are gathered in this room today are a great many folks who were not raised Presbyterian. This new development in American Christianity is not at all negative. For one thing, it reminds us that these denominational boundaries that we have so carefully constructed over the last 400 years really don't amount to a whole lot. They are our construction, not God's. And in fact, we remain one in Christ, whether we are Baptists or Presbyterians or Episcopalians or Methodists or Lutherans or Catholics.

Do we all agree on every point of faith and practice? Certainly not. And we should constantly pray that we can over time remove some of the barriers that still separate us. But ultimately it is not our work, but the work of the Holy Spirit in and among us that will break down these manmade boundaries. Jesus calls us to build and strengthen unity, by the power of the Holy Spirit, until the day when he returns in the clouds, with power.

In his Revelation John summons us to bow before the throne of God and the Lamb, who is Christ. John writes, "the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' In John's vision the bride is the new Jerusalem which descends from heaven at the end of the age, a gift from God to all faithful followers of Jesus. John continues, "And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen."