

Becoming one

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Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-21; John 17:20-26

In the name of God, that we may abide in God's love. Amen.

Thank you Rebecca for inviting me. It is strange to be here in the pulpit after all these years in the pews — but here goes.

We had several bible readings today — a psalm from the Old Testament, a reading from Acts and Revelations in the New Testament. For all of these we remained seated. But when we read from the gospel, we stood, and the text was brought down into the middle of our gathering and we turned towards it so that it became the centre of a circle. This is the church's way of saying that gospel readings are the centre of the Christian understanding of the scriptures and from that centre, other readings are illuminated. They are the key to unlock our understanding of the whole. So I will focus on the gospel reading, and from there make some comment on the other readings.

The reading from John 17 is generally well known, and is often used in ecumenical circles to inspire churches to overcome their divisions and become one in Christ. This is not just so that the church is faithful to God who is one. It is also for the sake of the churches' witness to the world, that it may show forth in its life the God who abides as one in love.

So you may be quite familiar with this text already, but it is worth taking a closer look at it and some of its implications for Christian living, as individuals and as communities.

At first glance, this text is a little confusing. Jesus' hear-felt desire is that all may be one. "Being one" refers first to Jesus' disciples in their relation with each other. It refers secondly to their relationship with Jesus, and thirdly to Jesus' relationship with God, whom he calls Father. So we have these three dimensions intertwined, all being knit together by Jesus' prayer that humanity may reflect the divine life of God.

What does "becoming one" mean? Does it mean understanding each other better, becoming of one mind and heart? I would say, yes, partly. Does it mean becoming one in purpose or mission, all pulling together in the one direction? Again, yes, in part. But John's gospel is saying more than this. The gospel begins with the Word becoming flesh, with God becoming human. This is more than God merely being sympathetic towards us, or having empathy for our condition. This is God becoming one with us, knitting God's own self to our humanity in grace and love. It is the good shepherd coming to us to find the lost sheep and bring them home. And it is in John's gospel that this shepherd is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. Our being one with God is also our coming home.

Julian of Norwich, a 14th century mystic, talked about our becoming one with God as a process that she called "oneing" and "knitting". She said that we were knit to God in creation, and made for relationship with God as our source and home. And God knit God's self to us in the incarnation. We will therefore only know ourselves truly if we knit ourselves to God fully.

In this knitting, we are being formed, as in Ps 139 where the psalmist says of God: "you did knit me together in my mother's womb" (v.13). Julian also reminds us that when a bone is broken, we refer to its healing as the bone being knitted back together. So our being knitted to God is also a mending of something that was broken. It is a process of being brought back home when we were far off, and this being intertwined with each other and God is what it means to be genuinely human.

In the Christian tradition, as well as in other religious traditions, those who are its mystics, who are much further down the path of being one with God, are called “seers”. This means “see-ers”, those who see with the eye of Spirit. Characteristically, these seers are not angry and violent people locked into divisions and conflict. Rather they are known for their deep peace and compassion, for seeing the world with love — all of the world and everything in it. Although Jesus’ prayer “that they may all be one” is directed to his disciples, his whole mission has the world in view. The world came into being through the Word, and the Word came into the world, though the world knew it not. “God so loved the world that he gave his only son...”. And at the end of John’s Gospel, the writer says that he could have said more, but the world could not contain the books that could be written about Jesus. That is, his significance was for the whole world but was “out of this world”. Our being knitted into God is to become a seer, one who sees with God’s eyes, one who sees with love.

This is a life-long process that takes us gradually out of our small worlds further and further into the greatest possible horizon, allowing us to transcend divisions and fears, hatred and violence and diminished identities. Jesus is not only our example of how to live human life like this, but he shows us the way and reveals it shockingly to us.

When Jesus prayed his prayer, that we may all be one and abide in love, he then stepped out into the Kedron Valley where he met Judas and was betrayed. What followed was Peter’s denial, Jesus’ trial, his abandonment, crucifixion and death. Was that not enough? Why did he even bother returning? The trauma he suffered, on so many levels, would surely have been enough for him to give up on us and stay away, or if he did return, to do so with judgement and vengeance. But in Jesus’ resurrection appearances, *he* ministers to his *disciples*, and greets them with “do not be afraid”, and “peace be with you”.

There is a story that William James tells that helps me get this point. James was a Christian philosopher and psychologist in the early 20th century. He said, imagine a friend falling in love. You are happy for your friend, but you can’t actually see what they see in their beloved. Perhaps their beloved is not at all good-looking, perhaps is socially awkward, has a silly laugh, or strange habits. For sure, you are willing to be friendly to them, but what on earth made your friend fall in love with this person. So you shrug and sigh and say, “love is blind”. William James’ comment on that is, “maybe it is only love that sees clearly”. That is, while everyone else can’t see what is lovely about your friend’s beloved, your friend does.

So, I am saying here that Jesus’ resurrection speaks to us of the power of life beyond death that was the source of his being, *and* the power of love through which he saw the world, even after what he had suffered. Love allowed him to see clearly, to have compassion even on those who abandoned and crucified him, for he saw how far they were from home. He wanted them to come back, to be knitted again to God, to mend the brokenness, and in that, for them to re-discover their loveliness.

In this gospel, Jesus describes the purpose of his mission as “that all may have life and have it in abundance” (John 10:10). He speaks of the source of this life as “living water” (John 4:13-14), which never runs dry. Becoming one with God involves abiding in God, the author of life. Choosing to live from this source means that we are freed from fears and anxieties that weigh us down, and we can live by grace, with joy, and in peace.

This is illustrated by the reading from Acts. Paul and Silas receive a “severe beating” and are imprisoned, but rather than choosing to respond from an understandable resentment and fury, they respond rather from a different source. They are found praying and singing hymns, with their wounds still unattended, living life as if death does not matter, does not have power over them. And it is because they know otherwise, that they have joy.

The reading from Revelations is the conclusion to this book. For all its strangeness, and its apparent division between those who are saved and those who are not, it ends positively, with an open invitation: “Come”. And this invitation includes: for those who are thirsty, come, let those who desire take the water of life without price”. The gospel of John helps to illuminate this text, to put the emphasis on largest possible horizon — the invitation to all. And it attunes us to the water of life, the living water that never runs dry.

Jesus’ prayer to his “Father”, is a symbolic way of saying that God is our source and that in God we find our home. But this relationship has been broken. Jesus’ invitation, in both the gospel of John and in Revelations, is for us to know again the power of life and the eye of love that comes from being knitted together with God. May grace and peace be with you all. Amen.