

Sermon – October 29, 2017
John 17: 20-26

October 29, 2017-21st Sunday after Pentecost

Break-ups are always hard. If you have poured your heart and soul into it, if you have given a good chunk of your life to the relationship the emotions that a break-up unleashes can lead to all sorts of nastiness. Which is a helpful way I think to look at John's version of the Jesus story.

In the church, we call break-ups schisms. Church historians speak of two schisms; the first was the split between eastern and western Christians that gave us all the Eastern Orthodox Churches. This happened in the year 1054. The second schism was the Protestant Reformation that began in 1517 (500 year anniversary) and spawned many denominations and churches, including our own.

Given what we have learned about the writing and formation of the New Testament in the last century I think a good argument can be made for a much earlier break-up, or schism; the separation of Judaism and Christianity toward the end of the first century. Remember that Jesus was a Jew, he attended synagogue, he wore a prayer shawl, he celebrated Passover etc...Jesus saw himself and his teachings as being within the bounds of Judaism, as did his first followers. The Romans planted the seeds of the break-up with the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in the year 70. It was a cataclysmic event in Judaism. Religion was the centre of Jewish life and the temple was the centre of Jewish religion. The temple and its inner sanctum, the holy of holies was believed to be the literal dwelling place of God on earth.

I want you to think of 9/11 and multiply its affects several times. The same thing happened in Judaism that happened after 9/11, anxiety and fear went up, tolerance for criticism and freedom of diverse opinions went down. Leaders within Judaism grew more and more fundamentalist and less tolerant of what they saw as revisionist Jews, who wanted to add to or change the tradition. To the orthodox leaders this implied that the Torah (the Christian Old Testament) was not complete or perfect. With the temple gone, the Torah became the unifying symbol and ultimate source of unity for the Jewish people. The Jesus followers were a threat to that unity,¹ which meant they only had two options: keep quiet and conform or leave.

In the midst of this nasty break-up or schism in the late first century and/or early second century John writes his gospel. All of John's writings need to be heard and read with this context in mind. John is writing as the voice of a community that was disenfranchised from Judaism. They have been kicked out, told they are heretics, threatened and persecuted because of their faith. He is writing as one who has invested his heart, soul

¹ John Shelby Spong, *The Sins of Scripture*, p. 235.

and life in his relationship with Judaism. So, the language is strong and harsh against the “Jews”, his estranged brothers and sisters in the faith. To read John literally is to read it out of context and therefore incorrectly. Not only that, John is dangerous when a people and a church in power read it literally. The gospel then becomes a weapon that promotes animosity and hatred towards Jews and a view of Christianity that is counter to the good news of Jesus.

John’s gospel is written from a position of powerlessness; it is a plea for inclusion to and a criticism of the gatekeepers of Judaism at the end of the first century in Palestine. John’s gospel is an attempt to show those gatekeepers, whose vision was narrowed by anxiety and fear that Jesus and his teachings were rooted in the fundamental tenets of Judaism and not only that, Jesus and his teachings were a fresh expression of Judaism. John’s plea did not work and the split with Judaism became more pronounced as Christianity began to take root in non-Jewish areas. One of the things we seem to have to keep learning over and over again in Christianity is that unity is never achieved through uniformity, but not only in Christianity.

In the last few years there has been a lot of lamenting the rise of what’s labeled “identity politics”. Identity politics is short form for the advocacy for change that is done by people based on their experiences of race, gender, religion or social status. Think of Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, the feminist movement or the movement for LGBTQ rights. The lament is that these groups are splintering society into factions, that by focusing on difference they are eroding the social consensus that is necessary for a society to function cohesively. In other words, how can we grow, develop, become more productive if we’re all going in different directions, advocating for our own group’s interests? There is some merit I think to these arguments and I’ll come back to those. But often these criticisms lack the acknowledgement that the consensus or social cohesion of the past was based on an ethos of unity by uniformity. There was one dominant narrative in North American society; one dominant set of values and it came from those in power—those who were, white, male, heterosexual and Christian. Identity politics grew out of those people who began to say, “wait a minute, this isn’t our story, our experience is different and worthy of respect”. Not only that, “we demand a place in society where we can be fully ourselves, where we have the same opportunities as everyone else without having to give up who we are to the dominant culture.” Identity politics is the rejection of unity through uniformity. It challenges the dominant traditional story we tell ourselves about who we are. As it does, these challenges lead to a certain insecurity, fragmentation and splintering as people react: sometimes thoughtfully, sometimes defensively, sometimes violently. But, I believe that if those in the dominant group and those on the margins can stay in the tension of the moment with courageous, open, vulnerable and compassionate hearts we will see that God is doing something new: Just as God was doing something new in John’s time.

John writes of a different way to achieve and maintain unity, the way they experienced it in the life and teachings of Jesus, to be one as Jesus and God were one. The way to do this is through surrender. Jesus was rooted in his Jewish tradition; he was a Jew.

However, his religion was not static, his religion did not just consist of a set of beliefs that had been handed down to him and that demanded obedience. His religion and its beliefs were a way to enter into a living relationship with God, a living relationship with God means surrender to God. We put our lives, as fragile and broken as they may be, in the service of love. We ask and we pray for guidance to do our part, to use our gifts so that we can make real, can incarnate the love of God in our time and place. We offer our agendas, our egos and especially our fears to God's guidance and care.

What all this means, what it means to be in living relationship with God, what it means to offer and surrender our lives to God is that we are always open to something new, we are always open to a fresh expression of God's love in our time and in our place. We are not fixated on defending what we know, rather we are aware of the incompleteness of our knowledge, of how interconnected we all are, of how much we need each other. We are therefore open to the ways in which God's Spirit is calling us to wholeness. That is what John is saying to the gatekeepers and defenders of Judaism, "God is doing something new here; Jesus is a fresh expression of God's love for our time."

John says to the early church that the basis of unity is surrender; do not make the same mistake that the gatekeepers of religion made. Unity is not achieved in right belief, which is uniformity. Unity is achieved through right relationship, when a group of people commit themselves to listening for and doing the will of God in their time and place. Then the words of scripture make sense, "the goal is for them to become one heart and mind—just as you, Father, are in me and I in you." When we live like this we see the world and creation as God sees it—a web of relationships, each creature with its own gifts and purpose contributing to something that is greater than they are. When we see the world this way, it inspires awe and wonder and it is beautiful to behold. It is John's wish for his community in the words he attributes to Jesus—"Father, I want those you gave to me to be with me, right where I am, so they can see my glory, the splendor you gave me..."

That is the hope that lies at the heart of oppressed groups finding their voice and dominant groups finding their ears; that we might not be content with either a unity based on uniformity or a fragmentation based on grievance. But that this moment might be seen as one where God is doing something new, leading us to a fresh expression of the sacred in our time and place, leading us deeper into that web of relationship where a new unity, a new consensus will emerge based on the foundations of right relations: compassion, respect and justice.

Martin Luther King Jr. said this in the midst of the turmoil of the late sixties:

Those of us who live in this century are privileged to live in one of the most momentous periods of human history. It is an exciting age filled with hope. It is an age in which a new social order is being born. We stand today between two worlds--the dying old and the emerging new. Now I am aware of the fact that there are those who would contend that we live in the most ghastly period of

human history... They would argue that we are retrogressing instead of progressing. But...the present tensions represent the necessary pains that accompany the birth of anything new. ²

The result of unity based on right relationship is wholeness and wholeness leads to healing for everyone. For the marginalized the healing is full inclusion in the benefits of society. For the dominant group the healing is to become more fully human by becoming more connected to oneself and to creation. Men listening to women's stories of harassment and assault are called to let go of privilege and defensiveness and get in touch with our woundedness and longing for intimacy that when mixed with privilege and power results in the violation of women. Christian settlers listening to the stories of First Nation's spirituality hear a theology of interconnectedness that equips us to face the environmental crisis of our time. Those are just two examples.

The Spirit is constantly doing new things; our faith is not meant to be static. At its best faith is constantly trying to catch up to where the Spirit is heading. It is surrender to the possibility that our neighbours and we ourselves might be vehicles for God's work that creates right relationships. It is right relationships that create unity and community. This is the gift from God, not a set of beliefs or theologies to defend but an outstretched hand to engage the world around us. What a challenge, what a gift. Thanks be to God. Amen

Rev. Joe Gaspar

² Speech given on May 17 1957