

Swimming, Surrender and Unity—John 17: 6-19
(May 12, 2024-7th Sunday in Easter)

Next weekend is the unofficial beginning of summer and while it may be a little early for me, it's swimming season. It's in my twenties that I learn to swim; it's a humbling experience. It looks so effortless for others, but for me it's all effort. Truth is, I'm afraid of the water, so when I get to where my feet can no longer touch the bottom of the pool, my whole body tenses up and that's when all the effort begins. My heart races, my arms and legs tense and I begin to beat and kick the water wildly. I imagine to those looking on I that I resemble a bass flailing about on a line.

This memory and image comes to mind as I read about John's community in relation to our faith story this morning. Scholars tell us of a community trying to figure out what it means to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus, tense disagreements cause them to flail about in frustration. Bible scholars believe John is attributing words to Jesus to address the community of believers described in the books of 1 (First) and 2 (second) John. In these books, we get a picture of a community torn apart by differing theologies and beliefs. So, we have these words from the mouth of Jesus; "Abba, holy God, protect those whom you have given me...that they may be one, even as we are one."¹ John's community falls into the trap that so many succeeding generations of Christians have as well. John's community sees the religious life as the attainment and execution of right information—having correct theologies and beliefs. Divisions are created between true believers on the one side and heretics on the other. They sacrifice love for the sake of theology. They could not be of one as Jesus and God are one.

We also see this dynamic play out in our relationships when we think we have the answers someone we care about needs and become frustrated when they ignore us or don't follow through. As we become more convinced of what they need to do, they become more distant—ignoring calls and texts, keeping conversation superficial. Because the message we're communicating out of our insistence is that the one we love can't be trusted to come up with their own answers, we don't have faith in them. Even though we may feel we're coming up with solutions out of love, my experience, from doing this to others and having it done to me is that it's more about fixing me or fixing the other as quickly as possible so that the anxiety others feel about my well-being or the anxiety I feel about the well-being of others can be quelled. It's more about the comfort of the one holding the anxiety than the well-being of the other. We sacrifice love for our own comfort. We are not one, as Jesus and God are one. Out of fear and anxiety we are unable to surrender to Love

I learn a lot about surrender when I learn to swim. My problem is I don't trust the water. Andrea, my wife tells me if I just let my body relax, I will float. I think this is preposterous, I weigh 200 pounds. I'm aware of the reality that objects much larger than I, for example massive ships, float, yet the distance from my brain to my heart and arms and legs is too much when stable ground gives way beneath my feet. I need to

¹ 17: 11-12a, *The Inclusive Bible*.

learn to trust the water. With some coaching, hands placed under me and much time in the shallow end, I relax enough to allow the water to hold me. That's the breakthrough moment--knowing that I will float allows me to relax and soon after I'm experiencing the exhilaration of swimming. Surrender is the key to swimming.

It's the key for John as well—unity is found in surrender: we become one when we follow the lead of Jesus' relationship with God. When we empty out what we think is important and open ourselves to receive the gifts of grace. That mostly means acknowledging our humanity, our limitations and getting comfortable with not knowing. Not knowing all the answers about God, not knowing how our beloved's life will turn out if left to their own devices. In the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians, and you've heard this one before from me, we forsake the knowledge that puffs up for the love that builds up.² Rather than being the source of our anxiety, in surrender to God, our limitations, as Leonard Cohen put it, become the cracks where the light shines in. In surrender, ego and fear give way to acceptance. In surrendering and accepting our limitations, we accept ourselves and become capable of accepting others. Surrender gives us the ability to be radically empathetic and compassionate. We can appreciate other's struggles with faith and not be threatened by them. We can accompany those we love in their struggles without feeling the need to fix them. But simply being a loving presence with kindness, hospitality and listening as the hallmarks of the relationship. In so doing communicating, "I trust you; I know you have the answers within you, and I'll be here to walk with you." It's the message we hope new members to Parkminster hear, not "come and be like us" but rather, "come and join us on this journey of faith, of surrender." Unity is what happens when we surrender ourselves to something greater than ourselves. It's how Jesus and God are one.

Here is a story from my own past. In the nineties I work for a large non-profit agency. Part of our work is helping other agencies access government funding for community development projects. One time I'm gathered at the water cooler with Mark, one of my colleagues. He has just come back to the office from, as he describes it, "one of the weirdest meetings I've ever attended." Mark, at the time, is helping a Christian based organization that works with young offenders. They are trying to develop projects that will fit with the mandate of new federal funding which has just become available. The organization can only submit one proposal. At the meeting each department presents its proposal as the one that should go forward. They are mired in a dynamic of touting the benefits of their own ideas and pointing out the flaws in the others. Mark suggests a break. But before they break, one of the staff suggest they pray. Mark, not a religious man, has never experienced this. They pray, and in their prayer, they ask for God's guidance. After they pray someone else suggests they spend their break in silence in order to let the prayer sink in. That's what they do. When they come back and Mark re-convenes the meeting, some of the departments pull their proposals completely off the table, noting the merits of the others. One department notes how much stronger their proposal could be if they partner with another department. By the end of the meeting, they agree on a single proposal that is much stronger than any of the previous

² 1 Corinthians 8:1.

ones, a proposal that benefits the youth they serve and maximizes the resources of every department in the organization. Mark says he has never seen such a turnaround in a meeting.

Surrender is the key to unity. Unity is the result of surrendering our lives to something greater than ourselves. The grace of surrender is to come to realize that we can stop flailing about on our own and simply float, knowing that creation is not a place of mere survival, rather it is a place of joy. Joy that comes from knowing that life does not all depend on us. Joy that comes from being held and cradled by an unseen power, of falling into the hands of a loving God.

Rev. Joe Gaspar