**Yours, Mine and Ours**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

**May 24, 2020**

**John 17:1-11**

I am of an age where sleep is restless and every joint hurts. If I sit for too long, it is not pretty when I rise up and move across the floor. And most nights are punctuated with considerable wakefulness. I am not alone. I have had many conversations with people who live the same reality. We have often made jokes about exchanging emails at 3:00 am and passing the time together. While there have been nights when I had some inspiration for a sermon or column that was unfinished and I knew that I would forget if I did not make a note of it, as a rule on my nights of wakefulness I pray.

I have a long list of people who have asked me to pray for them; as though my prayers may have some sway that theirs do not. I assure you that I have no greater pull with God than any other son or daughter. But on the nights that I am awake I ask for God’s blessing on family and friend; those who have asked it of me and those who don’t have a clue. In recent weeks during my wakefulness, as we have been separated because of restrictions on gathering size, I envision the church sanctuary and where you sit on a Sunday morning in this space. And I go through the sanctuary row by row from one side to the other, recalling faces and families and asking for God’s blessing.

Sometimes prayer is a last resort that people turn to when other avenues taken have not produced the hoped for result: the recuperation is too slow; the medicine is not working; the surgery could not remove everything; complications arise in the wake of an intervention or procedure so that now the sufferer needs to contend with both diagnosis and other presenting issues. When science and medicine fail, or when fear is on the rise, some make their way to the hospital chapel, or church and turn to prayer.

I don’t judge anyone. There have been times when I have run to medicine and science for answers and for intervention. We are human and when we are frightened and in need of answers we often turn to experts before the unseen presence. Perhaps we turn to the unseen presence in tandem with the medical experts and professionals, but sooner or later we can be driven to our knees to seek God’s blessing and guidance. Or we seek out a text, a prayer from our childhood, a quiet place of contemplation to attune to the presence of Grace.

Jesus had a rich prayer life. We know from the gospels that he often stole away into the hills and solitary places to be alone with his thoughts: to pray and to find the solace and strength that he needed to continue to heal the sick, feed the hungry and equip his disciples. In this passage from John Jesus chooses to pray quite earnestly for his disciples. It is post Passover meal and before his arrest and as he prepares to suffer and die the unity of his followers is uppermost in his mind and on his heart.

In his commentary on the passage Gerard Sloyan, professor of religion at Temple University has written, The high priestly prayer of John 17 calls on God to make a holy people of believers in God through Jesus. They are to be spared from the world’s corruptions even as they remain within the world. They are the beneficiaries of his words. He prays for their unity. He seeks their protection. His heartfelt prayer is that they will come to understand unity in a very deep and different way: to be one in heart, mind and soul as Father and Son are one.

When Jesus prays that his followers may be one as he and the Father are one, he is praying us into the mystery and complexity of that relationship. Not just that we should become one with God and one with Christ but that we should become one with each other in the way that Jesus and the Father are one.

This text is deep and somewhat cumbersome to navigate as is much of the fourth gospel. We may be quick to dismiss its depth because its language is hard to relate to. A parable like the Good Samaritan or even a more figurative one like The Mustard Seed are both easier for us to navigate. Many of us admire the Samaritan for his unconditional love lavished on someone outside of his social and religious circle. And since most of us are capable only of doing small things with great love, the Mustard Seed is equally as engaging and affirming. But talk of unity and what is yours is mine and mine is yours and what is yours and what is mine is ours to share is more than a little abstract. But rather than simply dismiss the text as confusing and irrelevant we ought to sit with it and try to discern some understanding and application. I will confess that I stared at the text and a blank page for an entire day until I decided to walk away in confusion and try to become open to the spirit of illumination. My prayers that night in my wakefulness were not only for the blessing upon those I love and respect but also included the request for eyes to see and a heart to understand.

On the one hand, as we live through the pandemic we may have more in common with every single person on the planet because we all share the same concerns, fears and hopes. We have the opportunity to see how well world leaders are reacting to and dealing with the health, welfare and economy of their people and nation. I don’t mind confessing that I think that we are being well served nationally and provincially by leaders from different political parties with different political agendas who are united in their efforts to contain the spread and see to the welfare of constituents.

At a national level and at the provincial level what is in the best interests of the people is paramount. We go forward with measured steps; not wanting to do too much too soon lest there be disastrous consequences. Wanting to be respectful of the boundaries that separate despite the common ground that unifies. Our heartfelt prayer as Canadians and as citizens of the world perhaps should be “that we be as one.” But unity is no small feat.

There is some disagreement about the way going forward in the ebbing of the virus and how to end restrictions and open up the economy safely and in good time. Unity is illusive on a much smaller scale in families, communities and nations so Jesus’ prayer is a very tall order for disciples. Even across the church there is disagreement over who can be ordained, and who can celebrate a sacrament. Even the number of sacraments was divisive in the once upon a time of church history. So Jesus’ prayer for the unity of his followers was evidence of his great insight into human nature. Being one in heart, mind and spirit is no small matter.

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side. They had been sharing machinery, trading a labor and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference which exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on elder brother’s door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter’s toolbox. “I am looking for a few days of work”, he said. “Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?”

“Yes!” said the elder brother. “I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That’s my neighbor, in fact, it’s my younger brother and we don’t get along. Last week he dug a wider passage for water into his farm. But he ended up creating a very wide creek in between our farms and I am sure he did it just to annoy me. I want you to build me something so that we don’t have to stand and see each other’s face from across.”

The carpenter said “I think I understand the situation. I will be able to do a job that will please you.” The elder brother had to go to town for supplies, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, nailing.

At sunset when the elder brother returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The elder brother’s eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. It was not what he had even thought of or imagined. It was a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work, beautiful handrails. And to his surprise, his younger brother across the creek was coming to meet him with a big smile and arms wide open to hug him.

“You are really kind and humble my brother! After all I had done and said to you, you have shown that blood relations can never be broken! I am truly sorry for my behaviour”, the younger brother said as he hugged his elder brother. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder. “No, wait! Stay a few days. I have a lot of other projects for you,” said the older brother.

“I’d love to stay on”, the carpenter said, “but, I have many more bridges to build!”

I have shared this story before but it always gives me pause. When unity seems illusive and the fractures in families, communities, nations and the world seem beyond repair, perhaps we need to see ourselves as bridge builders, working intentionally to build a connection between opposite sides. At best we are probably capable most of small acts done in love.

Scant hours before Jesus was about to be betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted and executed he celebrated the Passover with his disciples. And after the meal and when he was still with them in the Upper Room, he prayed for them. That they would come to understand the special relationship between he and the Creator and that they would be united. Now it probably goes without saying that unity for the followers of Jesus has been illusive and maybe even a utopian dream.

The body of Christ is filled with cracks and fissures. There have been discussions and arguments about sacrament, hierarchy, spiritual gifts and membership. Some have argued if this means that the prayer for Jesus has not been answered. There continue to be disagreements about many issues of theology and ecclesiology. Rather than suggest that seeming lack of unity means unanswered prayer, Linda Lee Clader, Professor of Preaching has suggested a new way of interpreting unity. She writes that unity is not about solidifying into a monolithic block but rather a joyful interplay of dance. Perhaps the vision towards which we strive is not one of total agreement but the ability to join in, in disparate and unique ways, in the dance of faith.

Perhaps this is what unity looks like. As the Apostle Paul has written, the body has many parts. The body of Christ is like a dance with many dancers and a song with many singers. There is discomfort in diversity but there is also glory. This Christian community can be wild and crazy and sometimes out of step, but we can still sing a song and share in the dance of faith. And sometimes revel in the interplay of harmony as different parts make the song fuller, richer and inspirational. Perhaps the prayer of Jesus has been answered. Together yours, mine and ours makes a beautiful tapestry.