

Sermon for Sunday, May 8, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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One of the things about our bible
is that often
the same story is told
multiple times.
Sometimes
it's because someone - like the apostle Paul -
thinks it's so important
that he keeps writing about it in his letters.
But more often
it's because the bible
isn't simply a storybook, with a single narrative running through it,
or a history text
setting things out
in chronological order.
Instead
it's more like an edited volume
with multiple authors,
sixty six books,
some of them most likely written
by a single author,
and some bearing traces of multiple authors,
like Genesis.
And while some of them
are individually the only record we have
of a particular event,
others, like the gospels,
tell the same story,
but from their own unique perspective.
They include some things
and exclude others,
depending on what the author thinks
is essential
for what they want to say.

And of course,

they aren't writing
in the days of computers
when files effectively have no limit on length,
or even printing presses,
when books can be efficiently reproduced.
They are writing
in a time when parchment, made from animal skins,
is the most practical form of paper,
and when scrolls rather than books
are the way parchment is stored.
That means
you have to begin at the beginning
and end at the end,
and the only way to make corrections
is to scrape the ink off the surface
and risk damaging the scroll.
And if you suddenly remember something
that you meant to put in earlier — too bad —
unless you want to cut your scroll
and stitch in a new section.
There's no opportunity to change the order,
no opportunity for revision.
You have one shot
at writing this thing;
from then on
it will be memorized
and copied by hand.
So you have to choose carefully
what to keep in
and what to leave out.

And that's why
each of the gospel books
tells a slightly different story.
Each of the gospel writers
has a slightly different purpose
and a slightly different viewpoint,
and so we have four gospels,
each of them telling the story of Jesus
a slightly different way.

It's not until near the end of the gospel according to St John that we find out the purpose of the writer.

At the end of chapter 20 it says,

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

So John's reason for writing is that anyone who picks up this book to read might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of God, and as a result might believe and have life.

And this purpose is echoed throughout the gospel.

Remember that famous verse, John 3:16?

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Or John 14:6?

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

And now we get to today's reading, from chapter 17.

You'll remember that this is the night before Jesus died, as Jesus has dinner with his friends.

The other gospel writers focus mostly on Jesus' actions and in particular the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist;

John focusses on Jesus' words.

For hours Jesus has spoken as they sit round the table,

teaching them
 what he thinks is important for them to know,
this last opportunity
to give them
the words
that will comfort them and then lead them
in the days ahead.
And then his words
turn not to the disciples
but to God,
and he begins
to pray.
And it's part of that prayer
that we have as our reading
today.

One of the more peculiar things that you see
as you enter the courtyard
of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem
is a ladder,
perched on a ledge below a window to the right of the main doors.
It's made of cedar,
and the first mention of it
dates back to 1757.
Yes,
that ladder has been there
for almost two hundred sixty years.
And the reason it's still there
is that the church of the Holy Sepulchre
is home to six different Christian denominations,
and no cleric of any of those traditions
is allowed to move, rearrange, or alter any property without the consent of the other five
orders.
So to move the ladder
all six have to agree —
and so far
they haven't.

Similarly, on Christmas Eve in 2011
priests and monks from different traditions

were cleaning the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem,
and got into a fight, hitting each other with broomsticks.
It wasn't the first time it's happened — though more often about times of prayer and
silence than cleaning.

And while we may laugh at these images,
they point to a deeper reality.
We Christians
are not very good
at getting along with one another.

And Jesus seems
to have foreseen that
way back before he died.

Perhaps it was because
the disciples were arguing at dinner
over who was the greatest.
Or perhaps it was simply
that he knew
human nature
and our propensity
to find things to disagree about.

And so he prays,
“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me
through their word, that they may all be one.”

Jesus prays
that his disciples, and all those who believe through their testimony,
that is,
all Christians
all the way from the first century
to now,
Jesus prays
that we may be one.
That we might be united.
That we might be protected
from division.

And the basis for that unity
is not that they - and we - all think the same way
or even that they -and we - might agree on everything,
the basis for that unity
is that Jesus and God are one.
We're two weeks early for Trinity Sunday,
but here we have
the beginnings of what we call the doctrine of the Trinity,
the unity of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Three,
and yet somehow one.
Theologians have been trying to explain it for centuries,
and most of us still end up a little perplexed.

But one of the images that I love the best
comes from the Church Fathers.
It's called perichoresis,
peri, which means around,
and choresis,
which means something like to make room for, or to contain.
It's one of the roots for our word choreography - writing down dancing.
So perichoresis means something like
to dance around,
but it's a dance
that it not so much formal
as a constant movement
where one dancer
makes room for another
weaving and circling
separate
and yet together.

That's the unity
of the Trinity.

And what Jesus prays,
so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become
completely one.

is that we should be one
as he and God are one,
and that the way we can be one
is when we are in God,
when we are caught up
in that divine dance,
room made for us,
weaving and circling,
separate
and yet together
with God.

And that then,
that oneness
becomes the way we live with one another.
We as Christians,
makes room for one another
weaving and circling
separate
and yet together.

So where does that leave us
in practical terms?

It's not just about denominations fighting in the Holy Land.
It's about all of us.
It's so easy
to allow ourselves to be divided.

This political season
is marked
by division.
And it's not just political;
religion has come into it.
We're urged to identify
with one political leader or another - not just
because of their policies,
but because of their faith.
Presidential candidates
have spoken in churches,

proclaiming that they are true believers.
We've heard the line,
"If you were real Christians, you would vote for..."
It's so easy to get caught up in it,
to allow ourselves to be divided.

But what we have in common is Christ;
nothing
should get in the way of that.

The same thing is true
when we find ourselves tempted towards division by other things.
I might be about the liturgy,
or how someone does something at the Strawberry Festival,
or the way someone looks looks at us.

All those things stretch our unity.
But we have two ways to respond.
One is to get upset,
to gossip about it,
to widen the division.
The other is to remember
that no matter how we differ,
what we share is our faith in Christ.
And nothing should get the way of that.

Because
our unity, our faith in Christ,
is what binds us,
and it's what sets us apart.
And, as Christ says,
it is that that people will see,
and know Christ
come to believe in him
and have eternal life.