

May 16, 2010 – Easter 7C

John 17: 20-26

THAT ALL MAY BE ONE

This is the final Sunday of the season of Easter. Next Sunday will be the Day of Pentecost and we will begin a new season in the Christian Church. But on this final Sunday of Easter our gospel lesson is centered around the long prayer that Jesus prayed with his disciples at the Last Supper. Today's gospel appears at the very end of that rather long prayer which occupies all of chapter 17 in John's gospel and stresses the importance of Christians being as one. Jesus prays that all of us might be one, even as he is one with God. He prays that his followers in every generation will be united, for it is by this unity that the world will come to believe that he was sent by God. That, in a nutshell, is what John has written.

Here's the question: Is this possible? In a world that is marked by countless divisions of one group of people over against another, is it even remotely possible for all followers of Jesus to be as one? Let me tell you a story. Don't you just love it when the minister tells a story that everyone in church has heard several times already?

A group of new arrivals in heaven met Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. He began to show them around, pointing out areas of interest and filling them in on the rules of the kingdom. There where many "oohs" and "aahs" from the crowd, and they were obviously enjoying themselves immensely. Suddenly, Peter stopped a short distance from a massive building that was miles wide, miles long, and miles high, and without any doors or windows. "While we pass this building," he said, "you must walk quietly and don't make a sound of any kind." So they tiptoed past the huge building without a word.

However, once they were past, one inquisitive soul inquired, "Why did we have to be so quiet when we passed that building?"

Saint Peter responded, "Because that's where we keep all the United Church people from Canada. They think they're the only ones up here!"

But we have been brought up on a theological diet which suggests that we are the only ones who have got this God business exactly right. And we can find all kinds of reasons to suggest that the other denominations and religions have something wrong with them because they're not exactly like us. And then along comes today's gospel where Jesus says that we should all be as one. Which takes us right back to our question: Is this possible? I say "No" it's not possible. And if it's not possible, what did Jesus mean? Well, I'll go out on a limb and give you my opinion for what it's worth.

There was once a naturalist named Henry Fabre who did an experiment with Processionary Caterpillars. These insects will follow the next caterpillar ahead of them, no matter where that caterpillar happens to be going. Fabre arranged a bunch of these furry creatures in a neat circle, each one touching the one just ahead. Faithful to their DNA, each one followed the next one. In the middle of the circle Fabre put some of their favorite food. Would they stop following for food? Not for one second. They kept following each other in the circle until they died from hunger. Sameness, you see, can lead to problems. Perhaps we shouldn't hang around too much with people we always agree with.

But most of us do just that. We know all the old songs and we remember all the bad jokes and we can talk about the same politicians. It's great fun, but we're like Dr. Fabre's caterpillars going around in circles following each other's rear ends. It's really comfortable but in the end we're all going to starve to death. However, if you can put two different kinds of people together and help them understand how much they need each other,

than things can really begin to happen. It may take some effort but when we are ready to acknowledge our own weakness and appreciate other people's strengths; when we are ready to listen to other people's opinions, then we can stop following each other around in circles and create the kind of church we all want.

And that's my opinion on what Jesus meant when he said that we should all be one. As I said before, for what it is worth. Pray that God's love might continue to dwell within us, and that we may be one. Pray that our unity may be shown to each member of the family of God who walks through these doors, and to those outside these doors as well. So that all might believe. Allow it to happen! Thanks be to God. Amen.