

Sermon Easter 7A - Drive-in Worship

All Saints, Mt. Pleasant

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John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words [to his disciples], he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

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“Divide and Conquer.” That’s been our strategy these days. Actually, that’s been the only way Kris and I have been able to accomplish anything at all, while working from home, with two little ones running around. If I need to work on a sermon, he takes the girls outside to play. If he needs to make some phone calls, I get out the crafts supplies. And then, there’s the sweetest gift of all: NAPTIME, when, on most days, we get about two hours to both get some things done. I imagine that plenty of working parents are also employing this strategy at this time. In fact, we recently talked with one couple who told us that they completely divide the full 7-day week. One parent works three days, and one four, while the other one has all day with their little ones to play, learn, read, garden, splash in the sprinkler, whatever kinds of quarantine activities..

This week, I began to ponder the phrase “divide and conquer.” When it comes to getting work accomplished, I’ve always understood it as a winning strategy. It’s a win-win. If you delegate out tasks, you get more done. But when I stepped back and thought about it as a military term, I realized that in that context, when employed effectively, there’s going to be a winner and there’s going to be a loser. “Divide and conquer” is great for offense. But it’s not so good for whoever’s on defense. The goal is for the attacking forces to divide up their target - to separate them from one another, from trusted leadership, from needed resources, from the strength they had in numbers.

I’m no military historian, but my curiosity into the origins of this maneuver took me down some interesting paths of inquiry this week. I learned that the phrase “Divide and conquer” is originally attributed to Macedonian King Philip the Second, who applied the strategy to the expansion of Greek territory, and laid the foundation for the vast Hellenistic military campaign of his son, Alexander the Great. The strategy then figured prominently in the writings of Julius Caesar as it was instrumental in the expansion of the Roman Empire, where, just before the time of Jesus, a Roman Proconsul named Gabinius applied the strategy in the occupied territory of Israel.

According ancient historian Josephus, Gabinius, upon receiving his assignment from Caesar to govern that region, carved the conquered Jewish nation into five “conventions,” in order to keep control, suppress revolts, and delegate power out to hand-picked aristocrats. So it was into a “divided and conquered” nation - or, in the particular case of Israel, a conquered and then divided nation - that our Lord Jesus was born. It was in this fractured and occupied state which he taught, and in this context which he spoke the words, “No house divided against itself will stand.”

The Hebrew people knew this to be true. They could see the degradation of their once sovereign nation going on right before their eyes. They remembered the way tribes of their nation had been pitted against each other in the past, and how, when invading armies came in, the fall was so devastating, and the exile so heartbreaking, their forefathers feared they would never be a nation again. The people of Israel had seen what “Divide and Conquer” had done to their nation, and so when Jesus used the metaphor of the house divided, in a spiritual sense, they understood all too well what the same kind of division could do to their faith. And yet, when it came to Jesus, they could not agree. Some, those who followed, believed that the works he did came from God. But others could not believe that his miracles were anything but from the devil.

The centuries-long mission of the people of Israel had been to stand up for the oneness of God, to stand up against polytheism and idolatry, despite the consequences, in all things to proclaim: “Shema Yisrael, adonai eloheinu, adonai ehad” “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” And yet here stands, in the flesh, one who claims in Israel to be a god? or to be God? If God is one, and how can there be, another One? As we read in the Gospel of John, this is a main point of division between those drawn to Jesus out of curiosity or skepticism, and those who would become true believers. And especially for those raised in the monotheistic Jewish faith, the only way to accept the divinity of Christ was to take a huge leap of faith.

That’s what we hear Jesus commending his disciples for today. For their faith. For having hearts open to believe in him, trusting that truly he is one with God. For having ears open to hear his words, believing they come from God. “They were yours,” Jesus says to the Father, “and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. “They have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.” The gift of faith has brought true believers together around Jesus, the Messiah, and it is for them, before his departure, that Jesus prays for protection, for strength, and for unity. At the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, he knows that some will continue to believe and follow, and others will fall away. And it’s among those who have answered the call to be his disciples that he prays today for unity.

Unity. Jesus knows it is the only winning strategy. It is the only way this band of believers will be able to go on to the works prepared for them to do in his name. “Holy Father, protect them,” Jesus prays, “so that they may be one, as we are one.” Why? What division does he fear will rise up among them? It could be that he’s worried that, in his absence, more will fall away, and begin to lose faith that Jesus truly is the Son of God. But more likely, he’s less worried about the deserters than he is about dissenters. He sees the ways the community of faith will begin to draw internal divisions, to begin to make distinctions between one another based on their social, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

You see, as the movement grew, it was becoming more diverse. Jesus gave them the heads up, when he said: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold.” He was saying, others, beyond just you, are coming. Others have heard the voice of the shepherd, and will follow. And when they arrive, they may not look like you or speak like you. They may not dress like you or worship like you, but they believe in me, just like you. Jesus knows that as the movement spreads, as the ministry expands beyond Jerusalem, and Judea to Samaria, to Gentile territory and to the ends of the earth, the church will begin to grow in diversity both in people and in practice, and because of human nature, for that reason, division will threaten to creep in.

“Holy Father, protect them in your name,” Jesus prays, “so that they may be one, as we are one.” Upon this cornerstone the foundations are being laid for the building up of the church, and Jesus knows, that those foundations must be solid, for “a house divided against itself will not stand” But it must stand, because the church has a job to do. “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” We don’t have time for bickering among ourselves. We have work to do! We are his hands and his feet in the world. We are the voices who will share the good news. The work of the kingdom didn’t draw to a close at Jesus’ Ascension; it had only just begun!

We find that Jesus’ insights into human nature were right on point. It is our nature to draw those distinctions between ourselves, and the church is no difference. Division on the church is as easy to see as signs along the road - There are more different denominations than you can count, and factions seem to constantly be splintering off from each other. And I believe that those factions do grieve the heart of Christ. But more dangerous I think are the little invisible

micro-schisms that happen within individual churches or individual Christians. The lines in the sand we draw between each other, the judgments we cast on those we call our brothers and sisters.

If the Enemy has employed the “divide and conquer” against the church, then he’s winning little victories all the time. In all the things that turn disciples against one another, that plant the seeds of distrust between us. The everyday sins of judgement, pride, arrogance, gossip, and then the more sinister - and yet somehow easier to cover up - racism, sexism, classism, or political rivalry. These are the things that little-by-little can chip away at the foundation of the fellowship of faith, that weaken our ability to do the work we are called, equipped and commissioned to do in the name of Christ.

It is from these heart-hardening divisions that we need the protection for which Jesus entreats the Father. In this time of social isolation, talking about unity may seem paradoxical. Evidence shows that it’s still crucial that we keep distance between ourselves, that we stay apart and refrain from congregating. But though we may be apart in body, we can be united in Spirit. Even at a distance, we can allow the Spirit to bring us closer together, to heal us from divisions past, present or future, to soften our hearts, as we take a step back, and see what really matters, to appreciate what we have in the family of faith, to unite us for the work we can do now and in the future.

The strength of the church is becoming apparent now perhaps more than ever and that strength relies on unity - in faith, in loving service, and in prayer. The foundation on which the church is built is not made of stone, but on our common faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. So may Jesus’ prayer for us, his beloved, take effect in our lives, to melt away the seeds of division sown by the enemy so that united as one, we would, as St. Paul writes: “Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”