

## ***“Brighter Together”***

Rev. David Gregory

June 2, 2019

Seventh Sunday of Easter



### **First reading**

John 17:20-26, adapted from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

I'm praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me. The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—just as you are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. The same glory you gave me, I gave them, so they'll be as unified and together as we are—I in them and you in me. Then they'll be mature in this oneness, and give the godless world evidence that you've sent me and loved them in the same way you've loved me. I want those you gave me to be with me, right where I am, so they can see my glory, the splendor you gave me, having loved me long before there ever was a world. The world has never known you, but I have known you, and these disciples know that you sent me on this mission. I have made your very being known to them—who you are and what you do—and continue to make it known, so that your love for me might be in them exactly as I am in them.

### **Second reading**

a quote from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

The poetic and the veridical, the proven and the unprovable, the heart and the brain—like charged particles of opposing polarity—exert their pulls in different directions. Where they are brought together, the result is incandescence.

Thirty-eight years ago, I was a twenty-five year-old seminary graduate. Like many of my young, fresh-faced white male cohorts, I knew a lot of stuff. In three years of graduate work, our brains got stuffed with stuff. I knew various systems of theology and could explain some of them. I knew a lot about the history of civilization and especially of western Christianity. I could translate large portions of the New Testament from its original Greek. That's all pretty rusty now. I could translate the first eleven chapters of Genesis from the Hebrew. Don't even ask me to do that now.

The school, in Denver, Colorado, was supposedly turning out young ministers, but really we were just young theologians. We didn't know squat about the church. For one semester, we were treated to a course in "practical theology" in which the one professor who had actually been a pastor of a church (in the ancient past, that is) rambled on about how he had handled what he described as "pastoral care." Our homiletics professor who trained us to preach said, in effect, "If you're good in the pulpit, no one will care what you do the rest of the week." He had never been a pastor. The idea behind all of this training was to take a young man, teach him theology, history, biblical languages, and public speaking, and then drop him into the soup called *church* and let him learn to swim. (I'm being more cynical than facetious here.) Within a month of graduation, I was in that very soup. I was the Associate Pastor of a large church in the Chicago area, responsible for youth and children's ministry. I also directed the church choir, sang most every Sunday, and was otherwise at the beck and call of the senior minister. I was also absolutely clueless. And I've spent the next (almost) four decades trying to get a clue.

What calls all of this to mind today is the passage from John 17, known to theologians as the "intercessory prayer of Christ," with Jesus alone in the garden a distance from his sleeping disciples. This is the scene where he sweats drops of blood and asks for this cup to pass from him. But before all that, he prays for his disciples and for those who will believe their testimony in the future. And he prays that they will be one. My master's thesis was a pretty bad theological treatise on this very passage, but in the decades since, each time I've encountered these words, I've found myself strangely at home. It's as if there's some sort of telescoping effect reaching all the way to the present moment, a lineage of prayer for unity and oneness that started supposedly with Jesus, spread to his disciples, and through them to the rest of us. And then, ironically, twelve years ago as I came on board with the United Church of Christ, I found that the motto of the denomination is lifted directly from this passage: "That they all may be one." It is called, after all, the "United" Church of Christ, which seeks to be known as both a "united" church and a "uniting" one.

The idea of unity and oneness, however, has moved in a much different trajectory for me in recent years. The old Baptists of my seminary days would have said that true unity could only happen between people who are in right relationship to God through the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ. The ecumenical fervor of the United Church of Christ would say that true unity comes from dropping some of the barriers of theological distinction to pursue a common ecclesial relationship for the common good. But deep in my spirit, I've come to know that it is infinitely more than that. There is a new oneness, you see—a new "marriage" of science and mysticism that is revolutionizing how we look at things like matter and spirit.

Quantum physics teaches us that everything in the universe, whether matter or spirit, is really just energy, and that the field inhabited by sub-atomic particles is mostly empty space. All of this energy vibrates at different frequencies, the lower frequencies condensing in what appears to us as solid form, and higher frequencies taking on qualities which cannot be perceived with our five senses. Traditional science has often had a disdain for conversations around spirituality, and traditional religion has often had a disdain for science. One would say that seeing is believing, the other that believing is seeing. In this new way of looking at things, both are true, but this is far too simplistic an explanation, and a single Sunday message will not serve to advance our understanding of the reality of the situation.



This deeper way of seeing is found in practices like contemplation, meditation, and prayer. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a French Jesuit and philosopher whose writings in the first half of the 20th century got him in a lot of trouble with the church, but the posthumous publishing of his work has influenced our ideas and attitudes around spirituality and cosmology more than we can say. He says that

the poetic and the veridical, the proven and the unprovable, the heart and the brain—like charged particles of opposing polarity—exert their pulls in different directions. Where they are brought together, the result is incandescence.

For me this is a clear and simple—and deeper—way of reading the words from John’s gospel—a way of clarifying my understanding of what unity or oneness actually consists, i.e., opposing polarities coming together to produce energy, or in Teilhard’s word, *incandescence* (light; Divine light).

Every week I ask you to stand in a circle at the end of our service and see the divine light in one another, to recognize and greet it—hopefully to treasure it and carry it forth. Nothing unifies us as does our understanding that we are from one and the same source, and that the same source energy is in everything and everyone. The ancients have called this energy many things. In the Christian tradition it has been described as Holy Spirit. Some call it God. Some call it Presence. Some call it Life, universal consciousness, or the unified field. It doesn’t matter what you call it.

All the sermons we’ve preached about unity, exhorting people to get along with each other in church, seem really shallow to me now. Unity is not something we seek or strive for. By virtue of the makeup of the universe, oneness just *is*. We’re not separate beings; we’re all made of the same energy which is God. The only thing we need to do is to develop greater consciousness of that oneness, and this is the whole meaning behind our spiritual practices; it is the whole attraction to Celtic spirituality, bringing our spiritual selves to the ground of the earth which is all around us, which is actually in us, which actually is us. The greater this unity consciousness, the greater the love, as we become more and more aware that everything is part of us, or as we read in the New Testament, that we are “members one of another.” This is the principle and the practice out of which will grow everything we will ever do together in this place. I cannot imagine another time in our history that could have more potential or be more interesting or exciting. The best is truly yet to come.