



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Rector

For the Love of Double Sinks

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 12, 2013

The Seventh Sunday of Easter: Sunday after the Ascension

Based on John 17:20-26

In preaching I attempt to be practical. Lofty unrealistic waxing, no matter how beautiful, has never done the trick for me. It is important to feel each week that there is something in the gospel to which I can cling with some hope of its positively affecting my life—my *real* life. I look for it; I want it to be there. By this time in Easter, though, (this is, as you know, the last week of the season of Easter, next week being Pentecost), I am worn out with the gospel of John. Every sentence sounds just like the one before: "that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one." My head starts to spin; and yet these final chapters of John are reported as among the last words of Jesus, his high priestly prayer, a concluding statement of all things important as he prepared to leave his disciples. That alone gives them great heft, even though they were composed a full seventy years after Jesus' death. Additionally, they are important as a reflection of real life in the community of a group of early Christians.

Real life—that is the hard part, particularly when it comes to being in unity, unified, one with one another. It sounds good. But from the earliest days of the Jesus movement, which eventually—sometimes gloriously and sometimes dastardly—morphed into what we know as the church, there has been trouble. Being at one with one another, let's be honest, usually means getting everyone to arrive at the position that just happens to be ours. To this day—after years and years of life in general and specifically in the church—I remain amazed that not everyone agrees with me. I know that sounds silly and maybe a touch arrogant, but it is the truth. When I am finally clear about something, on some level it never fails to astonish me that not everyone sees it my way—"it" being any number of issues.

Since it is Mother's Day and all, I hope you will indulge me one "mother" story. Mine, at 95, is a little less clear on details than she used to be. But were we to have a conversation about church unity, which is to say its scarcity in the church, she would to this day tell a story to illustrate her conclusion that there is no meanness like "church meanness," no bad behavior like behaving badly in church. When I was very little, actually before my conscious memory, the First Baptist Church decided to build a new parsonage for the pastor and his (always a "his" in this case) family. As luck would have it, it was being constructed just across the street from the home in which I spent my childhood. As the story goes, it was to be a lovely home with all the modern conveniences. Mother recalls a business meeting following church one morning when the community was voting on the project—the Baptist Church being more democratic than the Episcopal Church, the members-at-large often voted on big projects. For some time plans had been available for view, and there was much interest and talk about this big event. Mother says that on that morning a friend of hers, Nellie Sue, gravely rose to speak—you cannot make this stuff up! In Mother's words, Nellie Sue apparently was "having a very bad day; bless her heart." She was quite exercised about the overall cost and particularly the expense of the well-appointed kitchen. Her chief complaint was that there were double sinks in the kitchen—this was the late 50's in small town Mississippi. Nellie Sue stated that she didn't have double sinks and she certainly didn't know why the preacher's wife needed them. It was my mother's last church business meeting!

When the narrator of John wrote this gospel, life in his community was a mess too, and the issues were even bigger than the question of double sinks. He wrote so extensively about unity and had his Jesus speak so much about it because of its scarcity. In fact, the community was being torn apart. Almost exclusively Jewish, the community of John was split between those who wished to remain observant Jews and those who had come to understand themselves as Christians, followers of Jesus. To get an even clearer picture of how deep the divisions were, we look to the First Epistle of John, written by the same narrator, for more

details. One of the early heresies of the church had arisen: docetism, a belief which denied the reality of the Incarnation, claiming that Jesus had not really come in the flesh but only in the spirit—docetism from *dokein and dokesis*, meaning “to seem,” as in a phantom. This is not simply a matter of “you say to-MAY-to and I say to-MAH-to.” This was big stuff, doctrinal issues of the first order. Differences here were lines in the sand writ large and deep. And yet the author pled for unity, reminding the readers again and again of Jesus’ imperative that we love particularly and dramatically without regard to our differences, that we in fact love in such a way that we would be recognized as followers of Jesus.

What is remarkable to me about that is that this was the prayer even in the midst of such desperate divisiveness over important issues. There is no evidence that widespread reconciliation ever occurred in the community of John or for that matter that it has ever occurred in the church as a whole! Maybe reconciliation understood as all coming to agree is not the imperative. The imperative that seems to cross all boundaries is the imperative to love. Remarkable on one hand but quite ordinary on the other, the writers of scripture, those being most directive about love and unity, struggled with the reality of it just as we do. That is precisely why they wrote so much about it—writing as though it were, in hopes that it might be.

Though it is a temptation to do so, it is too flip to say that unity does not matter. One of the reasons there is “no meanness like church meanness,” as Mother claims, is that people deeply care about the issues that divide us. But in the end, what rules the day is love, not doctrine. There is no place in religion for marking people off our list, for holding them in no regard whatsoever, for treating them as though they and their existence no longer matter to us. And yet we also know that it happens all the time—that we have been both the victim and the perpetrator of such hardness over big issues and really, really small ones. Getting genuinely angry with one another from time to time is essentially unavoidable, looking at various issues or takes on truth with conflicting conclusions is inevitable, but choosing to live without regard for one another over anything—even over a belief that is to us a crucial religious truth—is not acceptable.

I think that Jesus was saying that we are to be one in love, not in precise belief. No matter how belief-driven we are, the truth is that Jesus just did not seem to care a great deal about uniformity in belief—“the spirit blows where the spirit blows,” he once said. But he seemed to care hugely about love—“love as I have loved you,” he said often. When you tell me of your love for God, it is impossible for me to know specifically, or for that matter even approximately, what that means to you. The same is true when I tell you what God means to me. But when we act in love, when we act lovingly, that language is universal. Deep inside we know how love acts. Being one in love is what matters.

Is that practical? Honestly, I am not sure. It is probably not practical if by that we mean that it is always the easiest or the most natural course for us to take. But in the end I believe it is where life is—where life and love and God are comingled in such a way that slowly we are formed as one, in love. In the end it is the only life that makes any practical sense at all.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

©2013 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.

*For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
St. Bart’s, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022*