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St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Seventh Sunday of Easter – May 18, 2016

“That They May All Be One?”

Scripture: John 17:20-26; 7 Easter C

Do you know that by some estimates there are some 40,000 Christian denominations active in the world today, at least 8,000 of which are located within the United States alone? So much for Jesus' prayer that those who believe in him ... “may all be one”?

Of course I might mention at this point that we know there are some thirty Major League Teams made up of either twenty-five active players per roster or, by some points of view, of forty active players per roster, with at least nine, and in the case of the American League, ten specific positions or roles with names such as “catcher”, “right fielder”, “short stop”, and “designated hitter”, suggesting that on any given weekend in the United States and Canada there are somewhere between 750 and 1,200 men all somewhat uniquely dressed and collectively engaged in a single game called... “Baseball.”

And right now, going on with or without our permission, is the proliferation of unusual, even outlandish, creativity in the culinary arts leading to a dazzling, confusing, even mind-blowing collection of some twenty-one different styles of pizza, including the ubiquitous “New York” style, the provincial “Ohio Valley Style”, and the little-known-in-most-quarters “Grandma Style” pizza, which is really a bit of a Sicilian thing with a Long Island twist. It’s shocking. How can anybody keep up? And they all call themselves “pizza.”

And did you know that within our own congregation of St. Stephen’s Church, right here in our midst, come people from --- well, I stopped counting at 47--- different zip codes. People from over 47 separate neighborhoods, over 47 different locales. People from different shopping districts, different neighborhoods, different school systems, all calling themselves members of one church... St. Stephen’s. How can this possibly be?

Well, to the more pertinent question this morning, the more pertinent issue of our experience as Christians within our 40,000 different expressions of Christianity, I gather that whatever Jesus had in mind when he prayed “... that we all may be one”... well, we’ve either really messed that up, or Jesus’ way of being one is a lot bigger than what some people might think.

What kind of life would this be were we all simply copies of one another in understandings and hopes and dreams and ideas? No variety, no creativity, no surprise or newness or curiosity. Some may say we would be more peaceful, and they may even trade their freedom of thought or expression, or limit yours, to acquire such peace in their lives. But I gather that in a world of constant innovation and change, of new experiences, and challenges, a world like the one in which we live, a life without difference would really be no life at all. I mean, how could you play a good game of baseball with nine center fielders?

Long ago I set aside the idea that the proliferation of Christian denominations is *necessarily* a sin. Oh, I have no doubt that many of those denominations have grown out of trivial disputes over aesthetics or clothing or real estate or one family's feud with another, and sin is certainly a part of that. Yet I also suspect that the manifestation of many denominations is a realistic expression of the wonderful, even sometime divergent, expressions of life, and our different expressions of faith make room within the Church for people of different cultures, languages, backgrounds, races, tastes, sensitivities, and experiences to share something of faith. Surely not every expression of Christian faith is always so faithful to the way of Jesus. But the "oneness" of which Jesus speaks seems no euphemism for *uniformity*, a sort of outwardly enforced sameness intended to squelch varied expressions of Christian faith. Rather the "oneness" of which Jesus speaks must be a unity that would

overwhelm both our very natural differences and our self-imposed prejudices, so that a world with a proliferation of people that we might call old or young, or American or African, or Catholic or Protestant, or rich or poor, or straight or gay, or Episcopalian or Anglican, or laborers or managers, or ---you name it. With all of that difference, there might still be that call, that way, that community in which our differences do not overwhelm our common humanity, our common commitment to care for each other, and our common desire to be faithful to a god who surpasses our understanding.

Anthony Jewiss, an Episcopal priest, says of the oneness of which Jesus speaks: “That this relationship could exclude anyone is beyond imagining. To those who might wonder if the majority always represents what must be right, to the exclusion of others, Jesus points out that the world, with its myriad expressions of diversity, is the object of God's love, and that all those who comprise the world—in the there and then, as well as in the here and now, share equally in the opportunity to bathe in the radiance of that unity for which he prays.”

The oneness of which Jesus speaks, for which he indeed prays on our behalf, is a gift of the Spirit of God already given and waiting to be put to use. I don't know that it requires that we lay down our denominational preferences, though it *certainly* would require that our preferences not become unquestionable and harmful prejudices. We might be Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians,

Nazarenes, Brethren, Menonite, Quaker, Apostolic, or whatever... But my question is: Do we act like the loving, serving, hopeful, forgiving and forgiven people we are called to be? If so, we've got something in common that makes us "one."

"And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

In an ironic twist, the very man who many might blame for starting the whole denominational movement, the instigator of the Reformation, none other than Martin Luther himself, was a man bent upon unity, though he knew our unity was a gift of God rather than a condition that could be forced upon others. Luther said:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies, the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

One faith; diverse expressions. Unity above uniformity.