

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Seventh Sunday of Easter – May 13, 2018

“Together”

Scripture: John 17:6-19; 7 Easter B

How shall we live well and faithfully in the name of Jesus in such complicated times as these?

There once was a man who knew that the day of his death was near, and he worried for the future well-being of his children in the time after he was gone. So one day he called them all together to his bedside, and he gave to them a seemingly simple task. “You see this small bundle of sticks here at my bedside,” the father said. “Pick up the bundle and break it.” And so his eldest son, ready for any test of power, proudly strode forward and grasped the small and light bundle and began to bend and strain with all his might, but the bundle would not give in to his efforts, though he was a strong and sizable man. So another of the sons wrestled the bundle from his brother’s hands and pressed with all the strength he had, but the sticks would not give way. And several of the man’s children had a go with the bundle to no avail, and none could make even the slightest dent in the task the father had put before them. And he shook his head in remorse.*

* A story told by the Rev. Martin R. Bartel, O.S.B., upon which I have expounded, found on the Preacher’s Exchange web-site.

But then the youngest of the children, a demure and thoughtful child, still of a rather young age, came forward and picked up the bundle of sticks. And as her brothers lamented their failures and argued about their efforts and exclaimed the impossibility of the task their father had set before them, she quietly and deliberately slipped a stick from underneath the ropes that held the bundle, and taking that stick, she snapped it easily in half, and the sound of the crack exploded throughout the room. And her brothers looked at her with dismay. But their gazes soon turned to wonder, as she pulled out another stick and broke it in two, then another and another. And the father smiled as his other children humbly approached this task with new understanding, each taking up a stick one at a time and breaking it. And soon, together, they had accomplished the task their father had put before them. The bundle of sticks had indeed been broken. And he knew his children would be well, and that he could depart in peace.

It isn't always the difficulty of a task that makes it so hard to accomplish, but the means by which we seek to get it done. Those things that are too great in the undertaking, because they are too large, too complex, might best be approached a little bit at a time, tackled piece by piece. And while we might believe we have all the strength we need in ourselves to defeat the challenges before us, we sometimes learn the hard way that our strength alone is not sufficient for all the trouble which life can put in our way.

Jesus knows this truth. And it matters to him. He cares. For even as he is about to face the greatest challenge and threat of his life, even as he is making his way toward a waiting cross and his own death, he prays for his friends that they might be one, that they might be well, that they might rest in God's protection, even though he must leave them in this world. They would be better off as one, approaching the challenges of life bit by bit... together. In togetherness they would find strength that they would never find alone: strength in labour, strength in ideas, strength in perseverance, strength in faithfulness.

And yet I fear that the world grows increasingly divided, that the nations, the religions, the churches, the governments, even our families, struggle with the increasing divisiveness that seems such a part of our landscape today, both personally and politically. Somehow along the way, I feel we have come to elevate our differences to points of outright division, and the strength we would gain in working together is lost in the struggle to achieve prominence, even dominance, and control. Having *our* way becomes more important than sharing common values and goals. The bundle of sticks we face is too big to break at once, and still some would seek to break it alone all in the manner they see fit. It's good today that we hear again the simple teachings, the heart-felt hopes of Jesus... that we live as one.

But how can that be? Not everyone is the same, not everyone believes in the same God, not every person is a carbon copy of the other. And thank God for that! For if our ability to work together for the sake of the world rests upon our complete agreement, our complete likeness, a single religion or nation or language, we cannot make it, for people are very different creatures. I don't believe for a minute that Jesus was asking God to make his followers exactly alike. He was asking that they be able to live together as one, to bring what they had to offer, and be together for a greater purpose. So, wherever people seek to live in peace, wherever there are those who desire justice, where human beings want to work and raise families in safety and goodness, where people desire to pray and share and help, it is there that we find our common ground and work to be as one. And where there are those whose values lie only in power, in might, in control, in wealth, in dominance, where there is no justice, where people are divided into factions and sects that seek the other's demise, it is in the face of this division that we must stand for another way, all of *us*, a way that seeks common ground for the well-being of all of Creation.

And how shall we do this? Any way we can. Any way that honors others, that treats them well, that promotes life and wholeness and integrity. Consider again the fable that began this sermon... how together a family achieved a seemingly unachievable task, breaking an entire bundle of sticks, together, but just one stick at a time. What is not yet revealed in the story is that, as the children of the dying man

came forward with their sister to break the bundle one stick at a time, some of them broke the stick over their knees, some cracked them only with their hands, and some stepped on them and bent them upwards to break them. Yet all of them achieved the same goal, and each of these means did no harm to the other. In fact, they worked together as one. Therein lay their strength.

Jesus prayed that those who claim to follow him might be one even as Jesus is one with God. He knows we will need each other if we are to find any wholeness, and joy, any well-being in a challenging world. But we won't be one because we agree on everything. We can be one when we work together for those things that Jesus asks of us: love God; love others as you love yourself; do justice, have hope, love mercy, give generously, practice faithfulness, enjoy joy, and work for peace.