

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania
To be delivered on May 7, 2016	On the occasion of the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year C

John 17:20-26 & Acts 16:16-34

### That We All May Be One

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” Jesus prays for his disciples, present and future. He prays for those who met him face to face and chose to follow him until this his last supper with them, and he prays for those who will believe in the future through their word. His prayer echoes through the centuries as it is a prayer for each new generation. This prayer was for our parents and grandparents who taught us to know and to love Jesus, and it was for us even before we were born, as it is a prayer for those who will believe through the word of the current generation. This prayer is for us now too. We are the generation who carries the mission and responsibility, the honor and the joy of proclaiming the Gospel to the next generation. Jesus prays for all who believe and for all who will believe through our word, that we may all be one with him and the Father.

The first generation of Christians, including Paul and Silas, had quite a challenge. They were introducing the world to their Lord Jesus. When they traveled to a new place, their word was the first to proclaim him. The Book of Acts is full of wonderful stories about how God opened doors for them and how the new Jesus movement spread amazingly quickly. The world into which they carried the Gospel was full of gods and religions. It was a place where one could meet a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and who made her masters money telling fortunes. Even that spirit recognized Jesus as the way of salvation and wouldn't keep quiet about it. What a strange and foreign world it was into which the Good News of salvation first burst forth. I wonder if we would recognize it.

Paul and Silas were proclaiming the Gospel in a world that was fractured. People were divided by ethnicity, religion, race, and nationality. They were divided by political and economic factors. Their world was carved up between those who worshipped this god or that god, those who sacrificed in this temple or that temple. In short, it was a world that sorely needed the reconciling love that they had to deliver. In short, it was actually a lot like the world we know today. The main difference is that the Jesus movement was new in those days. Now it is a venerable old religion that seems to be waning in its once dominant influence and power. So the challenge for us is to proclaim the Gospel anew, to reach out in meaningful ways to this fractured and hurting world and re-introduce the God of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation in meaningful and authentic ways.

That's quite a challenge because much of what we have to overcome is what it is people think they know about Jesus, and his followers, that may not be true, or it may be true about some of his followers. We have to be able to distinguish the Gospel we proclaim from the popular notion of what the Gospel is and what it means. People have rejected the Church and organized religion in general. They say that the reasons for their rejection are that Christians are hypocritical and judgmental, and that the Church has focused too much on money. What's worse than those who have rejected Christianity is those who don't see or feel the need for any kind of religion in their life. Maybe they have adopted a scientific worldview and have no need for God. Maybe they are simply apathetic, wondering what the point of all of this is.

As if I needed proof of the similarity of our world with the world of the first century, there was an interesting moment on the parish retreat last weekend. There were two teenage girls on the retreat, one from Virginia, and her friend who was from New York state. Both of these girls were Episcopalians. As we were sitting around in a group talking about different

things somehow the term “witch hunt” came up in the conversation. At that point, the one girl shared what I’m sure she intended to be a funny story. She explained that she had a friend who was Wiccan, and that whenever they were looking for her, she and her other friends would say that they were on a witch hunt. As I said, I’m sure the anecdote was intended to be just a funny story to add to the conversation. Though I did think the turn of phrase was clever, I don’t think I managed anything more than an uncomfortable, forced laughter. What really struck me was that the girl who said it did so with no sense of irony or how bizarre it might have sounded to the adults around the table. She was quite matter-of-fact as she mentioned her friend who practiced a modern version of ancient paganism, with magic spells and nature based rituals. (I looked it up on Wicca-pedia.)

Two things occurred to me: 1) The world this girl, and my children, are growing up in is very different from the world in which I grew up; and 2) What an opportunity! Here was a girl who was seeking meaning and purpose in her life, as well as a sense of belonging. She was looking to connect with something bigger than herself, something powerful and good. She found that meaning in ancient practices and rituals. The spirituality and mysticism gave her a way to make sense out of her life and to feel like she had some kind of control. She was searching for something, and she had found it.

The opportunity for us here is that we have a Truth to bring to people who, like this girl, are searching for something, even if they don’t know what it is. They may have rejected organized religion, or even rejected the possibility of God, but they still have a need for it. They still need God. They are human after all, and they were created to be in relationship with the Divine. They just don’t know how to go about it. Now we will not be able to reach people like our Wiccan friend by being judgmental, by condemning her beliefs as false and dangerous. We

have to find a different way. We have to figure out how to be in relationship with someone like her, how to be her friend, and in the context of that friendship how to witness to the God who created the forces of nature she worships. Relationship and conversation are the only ways to introduce people, re-introduce people to our Lord Jesus. On one hand it is about theology, how to teach the beliefs and practices of the Jesus movement. But on the other hand, it is about living the faith so passionately, so authentically that the Truth of it cannot be denied.

When Paul and Silas were freed from the prison and the stocks by the miraculous earthquake, it wasn't their well thought out argument for Jesus as the Son of God that convinced the jailer to change his life. It was their courage and willingness to face whatever consequences they were going to face for their faith. It was their concern for him as an individual and the fact that they did not escape causing him shame and loss of livelihood. It was their cries to him from the darkness telling him not to harm himself because they were still there. That kind of witness speaks louder than words. It takes time, commitment, and creativity, but it bears fruit that changes lives and changes the world.

Let us pray this morning along with Jesus that God send the Holy Spirit upon us for our own sake, but also for the sake of those to whom we will proclaim his Gospel with power and glory. Let us pray that God makes us instruments of his grace. Let us pray that God makes us one—with each other, with our neighbors in the world, and with Jesus our Lord who is One with God.

Amen.