

That We All May Be One

The Seventh Sunday after Easter

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The Reverend Rebecca Justice Schunior, Associate Rector

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The Players productions of Twelve Angry Jurors is underway. I haven't seen it yet and I've never seen it performed on stage. But I have vivid memories of reading it and performing it as a fifth grader in what, I'm sure was a stellar production. The idea of twelve fifth graders deciding whether or not to condemn a man for murder, a murder that will be punished by the death penalty sounds like some teacher's macabre sense of humor. But the story captured my imagination. Complete unity is needed by the jury to make a decision, guilty or not guilty, otherwise there will be a mistrial. Initially the overwhelming number of jurors supports a guilty verdict; however, one juror resists and slowly persuades the others to slow down, examine the case and see the bigger picture. I desperately wanted to play the juror who is the original lone not guilty vote in a murder trial. This juror combined two of the activities I admired the most – solving crimes and fighting for justice. Instead I believe I was cast as juror who says the fewest lines, but the play left an indelible image of the dangers, difficulties, and ultimate triumphs that are possible in civic life.

In today's gospel, Jesus is concerned for what will become of the life of his followers. This is his farewell discourse. We're back to the night before the crucifixion, the same night where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and shares bread and wine with them in the Eucharistic feast. At this point though, Jesus is looking far into the future, after he will no longer be with his disciples and voicing his hopes for their future. He hopes that the community will have the kind of unity characterized by the unity of him and God. And that this unity will become a defining characteristic of the community that follows Jesus.

Well we all know how worked out. The church has had, what I would call, a vexed relationship with unity throughout its long history. Church squabbles were the bane of Paul's church planting. Much of what we call the New Testament are letters he wrote to churches struggling to stick together. And since then the life of the church has been marked by division and schism. Even when it's not, "read the mass in Latin or we'll set you on fire" kind of division, there seems to be a lot of everyday kind of division. The kinds of division that are more familiar to us – should we spend our money on a new building or on outreach to the community; do we use traditional language in our worship or something more contemporary; do we take bold, public stands on the issues of the day or do we exercise caution and humility. The church seems like a perpetually hung jury.

And yet there is a sense that the church could and possibly should be a better authority on unity than it sometimes is. That we could offer the world a picture of what unified communal life looks like. Jesus wished it for us and it would be just what the world needs now. And let me say that the kind of unity we might desire for ourselves and others is not, I hope, complete unity of

thought that smothers diversity and individuality, but rather a common purpose that allows for meaningful action to take place.

Unity seems especially at risk now in our national life. We are witnessing a historic breach in the unity of one of our two political parties. Their chosen leader is seemingly finding unity among white Americans by unifying groups such as immigrants and Muslims into blocks of homogenous, fear inducing, threats.

In the other political party, something more routine is going on – an upstart, this time a democratic socialist – is making it difficult to coronate the most obvious candidate. And while this is not as historic, it can be unsettling. There is no unified front against what I would call a quasi fascism that is rearing its head and more practically speaking, friendships are being ruined, or at the very least, are put at risk.

So the question for us today is whether the church has any insight into unity that it can give the world as a gift – surely not unity of belief or doctrine, but unity of purpose and a way forward together.

To me, then, it seems important to examine what church is and how it is like and unlike other communities. *Ekklesia*, the word Paul uses for church is really just the words for an assembly of citizens. A member of an *ekklesia* is a citizen. And a citizen is a person who is not a slave, but a person who has rights and autonomy. Paul as a citizen of Rome was able to avoid execution for much longer than he otherwise would have been able to as a non citizen because of his rights and his autonomy.

Citizens of the *ekklesia* have rights and autonomy not because their personhood is recognized by Rome, but because they are loved and cherished by God. In the early church, membership in an *ekklesia* was not a removal or a withdrawal from ordinary civic life; the church borrowed the words of the body politic in order to deepen what it meant to be in a body politic. Citizenship in the *ekklesia* was a deeper exploration of what it means to be a citizen. What are our responsibilities to one another? How do we best live out our lives? The work of the *ekklesia* was to work toward an answer to these questions. Inevitably there is argument and conflict because that is how we come to make these kinds of decisions.

Of course, the church has gotten its work of exploring citizenship very wrong in the past. On the one hand, the church has challenged the state and the result is a theocracy. On the other hand, the church has withdrawn completely from the state and basically said that its citizenship is all inside our minds. There might be consequences of this citizenship after we die, but it certainly has no direct impact on our lived experience. Think of slaves who were given the gospel so that their immortal souls would be saved eventually, but not their bodies and spirits that needed immediate saving.

So, if we were to get it right, the relationship between the citizenship of the *ekklesia* and the citizenship of the world would be a bit more nuanced and complicated. Augustine addresses this relationship in his book *The City of God*. There are two ways of living, Augustine says. You can live together by bearing one another's burdens or you can live at each other's expense,

meaning, if you get something, it means that I don't get something, so I need to hold on very tightly to what I've got. Augustine is not talking about a particular political system that the *ekklesia* needs to embrace; he's talking about different images and metaphors for our shared life. If we are moving in the direction of life that is for one another, then we are moving closer to life with God. If we are moving in the other direction, they are moving toward chaos. And we are feeling chaos tearing at the fabric of our social lives at this moment.

The church, despite our very human flaws, has gifts that can help us in this movement. We have memory. Remember, says the Lord, that you were slaves in Egypt. Remember me, says Jesus, when you eat this bread and drink this wine. These are not empty rituals that drag us into nostalgia for the past; they are ways of keeping fresh the sense that we are bound together with each other as well as those who came before and those who will come after. And we are bound to God. Our common citizenry is invoked. This gift of memory serves us well in a world that is constantly forgetting. Every day, every hour is a fresh news cycle with no memory of what came before.

Our other gift is contemplation. We are maybe not such good contemplatives as St. Mark's; we have so much to say and to do. But we take the time for church. We leave a certain kind of life behind and sing and pray and take communion together. This can be contemplative. The great gift of the contemplative is to slow down. To be at peace with the present and patient for what is to come. That patience and peace is surely lacking in our world right now.

These are gifts we possibly have to share, but we have to practice them. It strikes me that some people are finding flourishing life and community in other places besides churches and perhaps we can learn from them. I was struck by one young woman I met this year who has whole heartedly joined the Bernie Sanders campaign. I think there is something seductive and dangerous about believing that one, human man can be the answer, or even much of the beginning of an answer to so much that's wrong with the world. However, she has found a place where her concerns are being heard. She has found a place where her citizenship is being taken seriously. And I would hope we would do that as well, but are perhaps not doing as well as we could – seeing others and supporting others in our common citizenship.

It is a challenge, and a challenge that will always involve conflict and argument. If you cannot tolerate conflict or argument there is a long history of hermits in the church, for surely it is only a solitary life that can free you of such a burden. But if you want unity, a certain kind of unity. Perhaps a little like the unity the Twelve Angry Jurors find after long and patient work in a common purpose of dispensing justice and protecting the innocent, instead of the unity of expediency and bigotry, then the church is not a bad place to look for it and practice it.

It might be best to remember that Jesus' words about the unity of his followers were a prayer, a hope, a wish. It is not ours to make or create, it comes to us from God when we seek common purpose with our fellow citizens – all of God's beloved children.