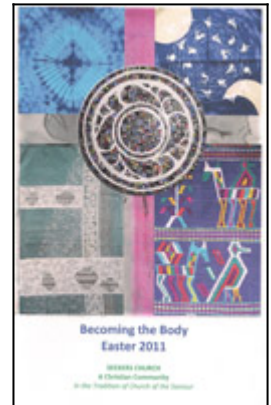


“That They May be One” by Jill Joseph

5 June 2011



The Seventh Sunday of Easter

One have these days will learn to look at the readings before I volunteer to preach. “Perhaps,” I thought as I prepared this sermon, “there was a good reason why someone had agreed to preach every Sunday except this one.”

My faith is pretty spare, running deep but rather silently through my days. And I found myself wallowing in the many words of this week’s readings, wading disconsolately through the ancient, discomforting suggestion that there is one true God and that only through him is eternal life available.

This was not an easy week of readings for me.

But I invite you to look with me again today's readings, consider what is being offered here and ask if it is possible that they can inform my life of faith, and perhaps yours?

It is important to understand the setting of today's gospel reading is not the time following the resurrection, but the Last Supper, told by John as the washing of the feet. And the words we hear today are part of a long section often referred to as the "Farewell Discourse", an extended narrative instruction in which the meaning of the life of Jesus, the character of his relationship to the God he calls "Father", and the task of discipleship are all explicated in elaborate and poetic detail.

Although set in the time before Easter, many scholars feel that the Gospel of John, written later than the Synoptic Gospels, reveals the earliest church reflecting on the meaning of faith as it was passed on to them in light of the resurrection stories. Notably absent from it are the wonderfully evocative parables and much of the sparse narrative of discipleship as found in the Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

This is not to discount John's good news, but rather to place this narrative in the context of the early church and the task it confronted of defining the person, life, and mission of Jesus, and in so doing of defining itself. This effort is important and invites each of us to also engage fully, asking ourselves the deep questions about who Jesus is to us and what his relationship calls us to be and do.

It is not very important to me whether or not, during a meal before his death, Jesus “really” said these things. What is important to me is that they invite me to ponder and respond.

Because what we read today is one small part of the much longer Farewell Discourse, I would like to briefly recall what I see as some of the most evocative and important messages contained there, which serve as a context for today’s brief and (at least for me) somewhat challenging reading.

John tells us that this Jesus warned his beloved disciples, “I shall not be with you much longer.” And when they quite reasonably asked how they can know the way to him (wherever this may be) if they do not know where he is going, the wonderful response is offered, “I am the way, the truth, the life.” Later, the disciples are told “I am the vine and you are the branches.” And perhaps most dramatically, “what I command you, is to love one another.”

Today’s portion of the Farewell Discourse is referred to in the Catholic tradition as the “priestly prayer”, concluding with the soliloquy, “I have made my Father’s love known to those who follow me so that this love may be in them, so that I may be with them.... so that they may be one, as we are one.”

This is, then, a meditation on discipleship.... and it summons me to consider the promise of unity: “that they may be one, as we are one.” What might such unity mean to John and, more importantly, to me or to you? Frankly, I am both perplexed and challenged. .

Unity: "that they may be one, as we are one." What might that mean?

I begin with the thought that sacred unity does not mean conformity.

The Christmas story, as told by Luke, places the wonder of the nativity in the context of administrative and imperial unity achieved by demanding conformity. A census is to be taken and for this purpose the roads are filled because rather than enumerating families where they live, Roman subjects are commanded to travel to their ancestral home. There is a certain kind of authority, both civil or outer and spiritual or inner, which takes delight in conformity born of obedience. And this is a great example.

The wild wonder of incarnation, of the implausible birth to a young Jewish peasant girl, of the messiness of shepherds, and of peculiar gifts (what does one do with myrrh?) all contrast sharply with the context of imperial authority demanding acquiescence and the "unity" of conformity.

Here today I need to confess that some part of me delights in order and success that I can recognize as the inner equivalent to this imperial imposition of conformity. I, too, want to see the roads of my life streaming with well directed and purposeful activity. Accountability, my quotidian practice of daily prayer and meditation, is precious. But sometimes my satisfaction in "doing as I said I would", of consistency, becomes an end in itself rather than a means. Rather than abandoning myself freely to our God of infinite surprises, I

become nothing less than smug about the tidiness I have created in my spiritual life. And this is a perversion.

I am convinced that I am often closer to the woman I am called to be when I fail in my commitments than when I am successful and self-satisfied. I know that my very failure can become a sacred place, open radically to the grace of God.

Unity: "that they may be one, as we are one." What might that mean?

If I'm fairly certain that this unity that is offered is not the same as conformity, I know I would like it to mean something wonderfully pleasant.

Specifically, those moments of transcendent, albeit illusory unity we can create with one another.

Let me start singing "Swimming to the Other Side" and it's so easy to imagine that we have created happy community. Instant unity. Unity light. Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with singing and I think we all need these moments when the boundaries seem to slip away. For all I know, it is in these moments that we get our best glimpse of heaven or perhaps even experience as much heaven as will ever be given us. These are genuinely precious moments.

But there's also something unreal and unsatisfactory about this briefly transcendent unity. It's too easy to forget some

pretty grim realities about myself, for example, how about that smug satisfaction I lapse into that I just confessed? In such moments it's too easy to pretend that my father does not rage and grieve and wound others as he sees the dark draw near. Too easy to ignore the fact that I can be too volatile and talk way too much.

I somehow doubt that this momentary, blissful transcendence is the unity spoken of when John writes of Jesus asking that we may be one as he and the abba father who sent him are one. However we imagine that relationship, it was real enough and large enough to hold the desperate plea that the cup of death pass by; it was real enough and large enough to hold the cross; it was real enough and large enough to hold a final anguished cry of one who felt utterly forsaken.

Illusory, transcendent unity does not seem to me to be the dwelling place of our God, however pleasant the experience and delightful the moments.

Unity: "that they may be one, as we are one." What does that mean?

Maybe the concept of solidarity gets closer to what it might mean: a shared purpose and communal home for healing the wounded world. Isn't that what we would do in the name of our Creator God? Are we not needed to bind up the broken places of our Jim Crow prison system and a dangerously warming planet and earthquake-devastated Haiti and Japan, and all the rest? Absolutely. Does not this solidarity inform what we know of God's promise of unity? Absolutely.

But I suggest such solidarity is still not quite it. Our collective efforts may falter or frankly fail. Is solidarity enough to see us through? Can we sustain our work together even as we fail?

I just finished reading the autobiography of Dorothy Day where she articulates a radical vision of building the world anew, with enough for all and dignity for each. But it never happened. So many came and left the Catholic Worker communities and farms. Many abandon the call of solidarity. I have abandoned such calls.

Perhaps this is because solidarity in pursuit of even the greatest good too often assumes responsibility for the outcome. I and you and we together are here to undertake the grand work of building up a world that is a worthy home for the children of our loving God. I and you and we together are here to change things.

But far too often, things don't change. So our sense of unity becomes rude frustration and disappointment and perhaps dissension.

Unity: "that they may be one, as we are one." What does that mean?

Of course, I don't know. But I do know that such unity is far more kind than imperial conformity, far more real than an

ephemeral illusion of oneness, and far more enduring and humble than solidarity.

Perhaps we need to search elsewhere in the "Farewell Discourse" to better to understand this unity. "I am the vine and you are the branches." What does this suggest about unity?

For me, something quite astonishing and radical: that within every one of us dwells godliness; that whatever image of God we hold, it must include the wild idea of God living among and within me, among and within you. Search the heavens if you will, flee to the desert if you must, but woven into the very substance of your being and as present to you as a breath itself is the life of God within you.

Perhaps our fundamental unity is rooted in this mystery of the indwelling God. We are one not because we share a call, not because it feels good, and certainly not in conformity to authority.

Rather, we are each earthen vessels holding however precariously or uncertainly the very spirit of God. My enraged father coequal in this with my giggling grandson. Adolf Eichmann and the children he murdered. The guy at work who frustrates me at every turn and the delighted collaborator. Whomever I despise or ignore or dismiss, whomever you despise or ignore or dismiss...they, like you and I, are branches of the one vine.

But even more than this recognition, our understanding of

unity must be informed by the startling command also found in this discourse, "love one another." Not "like one another". Not "enjoy one another". Certainly, not "tolerate one another even though you can't stand them". Love one another.

This is not a saccharine platitude, but the stern summons to a new life.

Love one another.

Jesus of John's Gospel says, "the love with which you loved me will be in them, so that I may be in them."

Insofar as we love, we touch the God within.

This, of course only exposes the deeper and more perplexing question that I find myself wrestling with as I look forward to our wedding in this church only 2 weeks from today: what is this love?

Again, I do not know of course. But I think it is something akin to commitment. Is love not best seen as the daily task of seeing ourselves as we are, of carrying with courage our own pain and woundedness that we might see the other with clear eyes rather than seeing our projections? Is it not steadfast "being with" an ultimately unknowable other?

This sacred task of loving is ours to pick up and begin again and again, but perhaps not ours to shape into final form for it remains what can only be called mystery.

I fail to love every day, as perhaps do you.

The wonder is that we are welcomed again and again to this table and to the heart of God. Furthermore, my failure, my sin is not a series of unfortunate events. Rather it is the fundamental reality of my life, Just as forgiveness is not an event, earnestly sought and hard-won. No, forgiveness and welcome are the way of our God, the heart of our God.

We are welcomed as we are, always precious, always loved, always forgiven. This is the way, the truth, the life that is promised us.

In this, we are truly one.