

**Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 4 2008**  
**Acts 1:6-14, Psalm, 68:1-10,33-36, 1 Peter 4:112-14, 5:6-11, John 17:1-11**  
**Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Seamus P. Doyle**

*Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that may be one, as we are one.*

Reading the gospel we have to keep in mind that John's gospel was written some seventy years after the death/resurrection experience and that the gospels are not always verbatim words of Jesus.

With this in mind we have to ask ourselves what was going on at the time this Gospel was written for the writer to put in such a strong prayer for unity. What was going on was this; Christianity was divided into factions, three of which were the Gnostics, the Marcionites and the Proto-orthodox. The Gnostic Christians believed that they had secret knowledge that the others did not have. The Marcionite Christians believed that there were two Gods, the god of the Jews and the god of the Christians. The Proto-Orthodox Christians were the forerunners of modern day Christianity.

In the time of St. Paul there were other divisions. There were those who called themselves "of Peter," others called themselves "Of James" etc and Paul said he is glad he did not baptize any of them.

The community of John was concerned about this kind of division and its impact on the wider community. In the writing of this gospel the author included this heartfelt prayer for unity from the mouth of Jesus and there is no reason to believe that Jesus may not have offered such a prayer, as his own disciples were conflicted in his own time.

What then, does this have to do with us in 2008? If we look at the issue of Unity and oneness with God from biblical point of view we have to begin with the book of Genesis, *In the beginning, when God was creating*

*the earth, God created humans in God's image and in the image of God, God created them, male and female God created them.*

Here we have the idealistic picture of what humanity was like in the beginning when God created everything in the image and likeness of God. The writers of the Book of Genesis are telling us that there was a time when everything was 'at one,' unified, people talking to the animals, walking with God in the garden, naked and unashamed. This was the ideal time that no one could remember but which they idealized in this story to tell us of what once was and what could become again.

For the early humans, it seems it was not enough to walk with God in the garden, they wanted to be like God; they wanted to be God. They ate from the only tree God told them they could not eat from; the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil and then discovered the immediate consequences, the loss of innocence, the loss of closeness with God, the loss of talking to the animals and the loss of having everything they wanted. Now they would have to work for everything they wanted or needed.

Pain comes with the loss of innocence. At one time or another in our lives we have all had to come to grips that there is another way of being, another way of doing things. When we become consciously aware that things are not always as we understood them to be, it seems to break into our consciousness with a force for which we are not prepared.

That there is more to union with God than saying prayers, going to church, reading the bible, giving ones life to Jesus, can be, for many a frightening experience. And yet, coming to grips with the reality that we can have union with God can be the greatest gift of freedom.

The history of the Jewish community is one of becoming a tribe, a nation and then a people of God. This was over a period of centuries, of prophets calling them back to the covenant they had made with God who told them *You will be my people and I will be your God.*

In the Desert, God spoke to the people of Israel through Moses saying: *See, I have set before you today, life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God walking in the ways of the Lord, and observing the Lord's commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering...I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life that you and your descendants may live, loving, obeying and holding fast to the Lord for that means life to you and length of days so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.*

It sounds too simplistic and so pious. It is. And yet it is the most challenging way of life offered to us. All we have to do is *choose life, loving, obeying and holding fast to the Lord for that means life.* The problem is that we have to figure out for ourselves in relationship to one another what it means to *choose life.*

To choose life in a dying marriage may be to choose divorce so that you may live. To choose life in an abusive relationship is to relocate so that you may live. To choose life in a business that is choking you is to close it and consider your options. But to choose life in terms of living a spiritual

life is different. It is to love those who hate you; to feed those whom you judge to be lazy; to give to those who are naked, visit those in prison.

The spiritual life is not on the same plane as our social or business life. Our spiritual life is about mental and emotional health on a plane above the concept of mere intelligence and feelings. There is a dynamic that pulls us that we cannot see but we know its presence or feel its absence. The spiritual life is about values that are not only above the value system of this world but also contrary to the value system of this world.

Compassion, forgiveness, love, mercy, respect, are part of this aspect of union with God that challenges us to be more than mere humanitarians or good citizens. It's about a sense of presence, and an awareness of the presence of God within us and in everything around us.

It begins in childhood with saying our prayers and doing what is right or we will be punished. It changes in young adulthood as we begin to question the values we have been taught and we go out to determine our own values. Our spiritual life is challenged as we grow in relationships, friendships, and our interaction with what we refer to as 'the real world.'

Then there will come a time when some outside force causes us to stop and reevaluate our lives, our friendships, what's really important, and this leads to questions like, "where is God in my life?" From this point on we are being to be challenged to *choose life*.

For most of us, our formative years are driven by success, survival or getting ahead. Then a point is reached when we come to grips with the reality that there is a power greater than ourselves, that we have made

mistakes, broken friendships, were judgmental of others. Then we stop and smell the compost and wonder what went wrong.

To live is to smell the roses knowing that to reach them is to experience the thorns. To live, is to know that I am fully human and fully divine; that I am made in the image and likeness of God and that there are times when I behave in a manner that is unbecoming of that image. To live is to have compassion for the masses, wondering where and how we will feed them and then doing it with five loaves and two fish. To live, is to reach out to someone and not be aware that we are healing them. To live is to forgive and to ask for forgiveness because we are on a journey to wholeness.

Jesus prayed *that they may be one*. It was a hope, a prayer, a desire. Just as God called on the people of Israel to *Choose life*, Jesus called on his disciples to *love one another as I have loved you*.

To be a Christian community in union with God is to live a lifestyle that is not in keeping with the world around us. It is to hold ourselves and one another to standards that are higher. It is to make a commitment to one another to help us grow through our mistakes, our weakness, our limitations so that we will be a better image of God to one another. When I help someone to come to grips with an issue means that they will be able to help me with an issue to which I was blind. Don't take the sliver out of your brother's eye before you take the plank out of your own. However, It is good to take the sliver out of your brother's eye so that he may see to fix your broken leg. We all have our weakness and blind spots. Our spiritual life matures as we lift one another up, not by pointing the finger.

To live in union with God is to live a radical counter-culture lifestyle in that we live to help one another; we live to set people free; we live to make people whole and we do so by dying to ourselves so that we may live through service to God in others. As we say in our Baptismal covenant; we will seek to serve Christ in others, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

*Jesus said: Father forgive them for they know not what they do.* Forgiveness became a hallmark of Christianity. In today's world we are so busy that we want to forgive, forget and move on. In other words we have little to no time to sit down with one another and grow through the experience of forgiveness. Instead we bury the pain and live with grudges and anger. In doing so we avoid the growth that comes with sharing our failings and our mistakes. We relocate, take a geographical cure, move from one job to another, isolate, but we do not care enough about ourselves or the other to repair the fracture and work at becoming whole.

Forgiveness and compassion is the path Jesus left us to become whole. He told the apostles that we are to forgive seventy-times seven, in other words, be like God and forgive an infinite number of times. Forgiveness is needed when we hurt one another unnecessarily even if that hurt was not meant to be. We listen, we communicate, and when we believe that we have been heard and our hurt has been healed, we forgive and we grow.

To be at-one with God is to atone for our failures in living up to the standards set for us by Jesus. This unity is created by a strong sense of the presence of God in self and one another and made present in making relationships work and in building communities. *By this will all person know that you are my disciples if you have love, one for another.*

We bow to one another and say “Namaste,” “ I bow to all that is holy within you.” Let this be our guide as we continue to build ourselves as a Christian community filled with compassion and all the gifts we have been given to mark us as children of God. Let us, as Jesus commanded, *love one another as I have loved you*. Let us work to be one as Jesus and the Father are one.