

Seventh Sunday of Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA
2 June 2019

John 17:20-26

What a wonderful weekend this has been for our community of West Feliciana Parish and for our Church. The Walker Percy weekend 2019 has brought distinguished authors to our small town. People like renown historian Walter Isaacson, novelist J.D. Vance, social commentators and influential authors David Brooks and Rod Dreher, just to mention a few. I was both humbled and touched to see these people in person, and I was deeply moved by their wisdom and passion.

Walter Isaacson reminded us of one of Walker's favorite lines. He used to say that there are two types of people in Louisiana: Preachers and Storytellers. He then told Isaacson: "For God's sake, be a Storyteller." I had never read this line, but the phrase seems quintessential Percy. I went home thinking about those lines, and I asked myself what he might have meant? Whether I fit in the Preacher or Story-Teller category? Whether I should amend my ways and choose a side? Or Whether Percy had an incomplete view of the role of preachers in our society, a view perhaps formed by the preachers he knew in his day?

I believe the significant difference for Percy is that he thinks the primary responsibility of the storyteller is not to give answers but to point the way. He sees preachers, on the other hand as speaking with a certainty and an assurance that tend to provide answers and point to the truth as they see it. Many preachers have become dogmatists, precept givers, assigners of chores, check-list providers. Many of us are experts at giving straightforward and easy answers to really difficult questions. We manage complexity often by destroying the very mystery we are called to embrace. We dissect God and cut him into little, tinny, digestible bites we can swallow. In doing so, we reduce the great mystery to pithy little moralistic sayings that often alienate those struggling to understand their place in the cosmos, and the upside-down world of unmerited grace.

So, before I enter into the words of John for today, let me request that you keep me in check. If I ever make our faith journey sound like a walk in the park, please correct me. Please remind me of doubt and spiritual struggles, please tell me of your pain and sense of isolation, please remind me of the shadows that are always a part of every journey. I want to honor the mystery that has become flesh out of love for humanity. Anything that reduces this mystery and makes Jesus into a merry, affable fellow, who would be great

company at any party or Bourbon crawl, reduces and cheapens this mystery. Help me become the preacher storyteller and the storyteller preacher I want to become. Now, let's talk about John.

In the Gospel of John today, Jesus prays to the Father for the unity of the Church. He prays not just on behalf of the disciples but also on behalf of those who will come to believe that he is the Messiah through the disciples' preaching and teaching. He prays for their unity so that the love with which the Father has loved Jesus may be in all the disciples present and future. He doesn't pray that they may like each other so much that they may have a good time together. He doesn't ask that they be united so that their Church will flourish and be considered successful. This unity is not so that there may be good church discipline, successful programs, impressive buildings, generous endowments, or even beautiful liturgies.

Unity in Jesus' mind has two purposes, and both goals are related to the world, to people outside of those doors: First, unity is necessary so that the world might come to know that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God. Second, so that the world might come to know that God loves them, just as God has loved Jesus. The unity that Jesus prays for is not just for the benefit of the Church, but most importantly, it is for the benefit of the world. Christ loves the world, and he wants the world to know him as the Messiah and to experience the love he has for them. Christ knows that he is our Savior, the balm that soothes our wounded world. He is the answer. But, of course, we all need to discover what this answer means for our own lives and for our journey of faith. After all, Christianity is a relationship and not a list of chores to be accomplished before we die.

Unity in Christ is a prayer that is very appropriate for our Church today. Anxiety has been the rule of the day over the last twenty years as mainline denominations continue to struggle with declines in attendance, doctrinal conflicts, cultural wars, and scandal. Within our beloved Episcopal Church, many of our churches have become more congregationalist, more insular, and more isolated from each other. We live in a climate of polarization that has caused great pain to our country, our world, and our communities. Regardless of where we stand on the issues, these last few years have been filled with significant wounds, uneasiness, and apprehension.

I believe the Gospel for today presents a path forward. The word "sent" is used about 40 times in the Gospel of John. The word apostle in Greek literally means *sent-out*. An apostle is one who is sent out on a mission by another. Jesus today says that the purpose of Church unity is so the world may know that he is the one "Sent out" by the Father. Likewise, we, the Church, are sent out by him into the world with a particular mission: to make Christ known around the world, and to show the world how much he loves them.

We must continue to pray for Christian unity, but we must understand that Christian unity is not unity for unity's sake. It is unity to the service of the world, unity that is lived out within the plurality of the world. It is unity for the sake of mission. "...It has taken us decades to realize that mission is not just a program of the Church. It defines the Church as God's sent people. Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the Gospel and the mandate of the Church." (Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America, edited by Darrell L. Guder.)

Some within our Church want to concentrate primarily on the task of making Christ known. We call this evangelism. Great evangelistic campaigns are initiated every year in places where the Gospel has never been preached before. With great zeal, the great evangelists will not rest until every person around the world has a Bible in their hands. I applaud this, and I believe this should be one of the crucial tasks of our Church as Christ tells us today. Some others in our Church believe that the responsibility of the Church should be to show the world how much God loves them through social services, clean water projects, feeding programs, health care, etc. Rather than preaching love, we need to show the world love. I believe this is also a critical task for the Church as well.

But, once again, I believe that evangelism without Christian service is incomplete, in the same way I believe that Christian service without evangelism is an incomplete solution. The Great Commission and the Great Commandment are intrinsically linked and can never be divorced. The answer to our Church problems is to get out, to engage in mission, to stop arguing about what it means to be an Episcopalian and to begin to experience what it means to be a Christian. To make Christ known and to show the world how much he loves them. Anything short of a reclaiming of our identity as missional people will fail, and our divisions will continue.

But, lest you think that the mission field is only found in Africa or in Latin America or in Asia, let me remind you that the mission field is all around you outside those doors. We are baptized, resurrected, missional people. This is our identity! The faith we have received is for the benefit of the world. Let us pray to God to help us be very intentional about our Christian Mission for the world, here in Saint Francisville and wherever we happen to find ourselves. Amen!