

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

SACRAMENTAL UNITY

John 17:20-26

We live in a world of competition and narcissism. We are taught that we can succeed only by differentiating ourselves from the crowd and thereby being “special.” In a 1995 essay entitled “Bowling Alone,” Robert Putnam illustrated the increasing individualism in western cultures, and particularly in the United States, through the example of bowling in America. When demographic trends are plotted, one finds that although there has been an increase in the number of people bowling in the United States, participation in bowling leagues has significantly decreased. Plots of trends in organizational membership in this country show a decline parallel to that of bowling league participation. Putnam lamented this trend because face-to-face social networking is foundational to democracy and societal stability. These social networks, unlike their cyber counterparts, Facebook and My Space, are characterized by membership in civic organization. When we join such organizations we submit our individualism to the corporate good.

In middle and high school I was an avid bowler and involved in several bowling leagues. In league bowling my individual talent was diluted, for better or worse, because the outcome of the competition was determined by the performance of the whole team. On the other hand, in tournament bowling, it was all about me. Better still, when I bowled alone the pace was mine. If I wanted to get a Coke I could. I could try to get a split so I could then attempt to convert it. In short, it was all about me and for me.

Bowling alone sounds like the perfect metaphor for a perfect life. I can do what I want, when I want and how I want, with no pressure of criticism or interference from anyone else. Can it get any better than that? Actually, the answer is yes. There are two problems with bowling alone. First, it is awfully lonely and when success is achieved there is no one to share it with. After all, if you convert a 7-10 split or bowl a 300 game and there were no witnesses, no one will believe you. And second, bowling alone causes community problems because it ties up the lanes causing others to have to waste their precious time having to wait for you. Therefore, it can be the source of at least internal conflict, if not external aggression. So, bowling establishments like golf courses have restrictions on loners.

Likewise, although the privatization of religion, the “that’s-fine-for-you-to-believe-that-but-I-believe-this” religious perspective, appears to be the ideal solution for societal and cultural conflict. The truth is that it is the recipe for just the opposite. Lonely, self-centered people who come to expect to get their own way become angry and combative when they are confronted by something different. If I worship a personal and relational God and you worship an inaccessible and legalistic god, we will be in conflict. If I submit myself to a loving and grace-filled God and you submit to evil spirits, we will be in conflict. If I believe in a God who reveals himself to be the only way to salvation and you believe in a pantheon of gods or that all religions lead to salvation, we will be in conflict. If we are not unified in the Truth or cannot even agree that there is such a thing as absolute Truth, we will necessarily find ourselves in conflict. And within the

Church, if we are bent on having our own way or we live our lives constantly in conflict, God will not be made known to the world.

As the Church, however we live, we are the outward and visible sign to the world of what we believe is God's nature. To be an accurate sign, or sacrament, we need to exhibit the "inward and spiritual grace given by Christ" (*BCP*, p.857).

In the *Catechism* or Outline of the Faith, found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, we read this definition of sacraments:

The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace (p.857).

The *Catechism* then continues with the definition of grace:

Grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills (p.858).

As the slave ship captain turned Anglican priest, John Newton wrote in his classic and beloved hymn, *Amazing Grace* (671, *Hymnal 1980*):

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
was blind but now I see.*

through grace we are forgiven;

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!*

by grace we are enlightened and stirred;

*The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my sword and portion be
as long as life endures.*

through grace we are strengthened to depend on God.

It follows then that grace is the sovereign gift from God by which he enables us, inspires us and strengthens us to live in a reconciled relationship with him. When we look at the definition of a sacrament with that understanding of God's grace, we come to see the Church as the material vehicle through which we can come to recognize and experience that ultimate grace.

As Jesus prayed for his disciples, and those who form the Church:

²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me” (John 17:20-23).

Jesus’ prayer is that we will all be unified in the Truth, which was incarnate in Jesus. It is a unity that is made possible through the reconciling death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through which we have been reunited with God. It is a sacramental unity because it is a unity that is made possible only by God’s grace and has as its ultimate purpose the revelation to the world of the nature of God. Since God is the source of life, temporal and eternal, the proclamation of this unity with God is good news indeed.

Unlike bowling, worshiping alone is not an option if we are to be the Church. We are the Body of Christ; individual members united under Christ as our head. If we, as the Church, are to be healthy we must function as a coordinated unit in order to achieve the purpose of our head. We can only be united through submission to God and mutual submission to one another (Ephesians 5:21). Ours is to be a unity that is not focused on our having peace among ourselves, but it is to be a sacramental unity that announces and demonstrates God’s will for the world.

Please turn to page 255 in the *Book of Common Prayer* and join me in praying the Collect For the Unity of the Church.

Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on May 16, 2010, the Seventh Sunday of Easter.