

**Sermon at the Holy Communion
Opening Service, Institute of Liturgical Studies
Second Week of Easter, 2002**

Enough? Really?

Remarkable, isn't it, how we have let ourselves off the hook about the oneness of the church! Remarkable, how we have spun our wheels and gnashed our teeth and preened the feathers of our pure doctrine and planned our negotiating tactics and spiritualized about an invisible church that has some sort of spiritual unity. Remarkable, how the clear intent of such biblical texts as John 17 and Ephesians 4 has washed over our finely feathered backs without so much as getting us wet enough to notice. Remarkable, how our namesakes, the confessors at Augsburg that steamy summer day in 1530, spoke for their successors in the churches of the Augsburg Confession that simple, rich, and pellucid article seven: one holy catholic church will be and remain forever, viz., the assembly of believers around the gospel preached and sacramentally enacted; it is enough for true unity that recognizably authentic gospel be said and done there; it is not necessary for human ordinances about the church's affairs to be the same. Invisible church? Spiritual unity? Bah! Humbug!

John's gospel addresses the situation of the Christian church after the founding generation, those who come to believe in Jesus Christ through the witness of the founding generation. One could see, patently and offensively, how the truth about the church's being and its oneness had been compromised: Christianity and Judaism were rent by mutual condemnations; the followers of Jesus and of John the Baptizer were bickering about who were the true heirs of reign of God; nameless little rifts separated one diocese from another and ran through the midst of individual communities. The whole enterprise of the Christian mission had been compromised; who would believe the kerygma of such a fissiparous church?

The same concerns drove the beginnings of the modern ecumenical movement. Out of the International Missionary Council and the Life and Work movement, incorporating the Faith and Order group, came a mission-minded ecumenism that dreamed of once more making a credible witness in the world, a dream that could move Charles Clayton Morrison to found a journal at the dawn of the twentieth century, imagining "The Christian Century."

And who believes us today? Oh, to be sure there are some remarkable stories of the gathering in of believers from our bishops in New York in the wake of last September's assault on the World Trade Center; David Benke and Stephen Bouman report soul-warming stories of multicultural outreach and of heroic pastoral ministry in the wake of those murderous events. Yet David has been under intense attack from within his own church body for his leadership! Such unity is too high for us; we cannot attain to it – and we for damn sure won't permit it!

For the most part, we let ourselves off the hook about this unity business, just as we let ourselves off the hook about the very nature of the church as body of Christ and the creature of God's Spirit. We are not patently troubled by our pretense that we can claim to be that church, even as we contentedly worry not a whit that "we" are not that one and only church that will be and remain forever. No, "we" trace our origins to a negotiated merger a dozen years ago, or to a secessionist immigration of orthodox pietists from Oberlausitz in the nineteenth century. "We" are the church to the extent that "we" have defined "church" to be "us."

Well, that's not entirely fair. We do have our confession, after all. We do have our doctrinal declarations, after all. We do have our constitutions, after all. We do have our canon law structures, after all. We do have our traditions, after all. "We have a law, and by our law he ought to . . ." – oh, that's from a different story; sorry about that!

Truth is, one thing that marks our sense of ourselves as church is that it is precisely our sense of ourselves as church that is the *basis* of our sense of ourselves as church. And that's bad news, when we recall that Christ builds his church, builds it on the confession of his name, builds it on the testimony of one generation to another about himself crucified and risen, builds it on the otherwise grubby business of making disciples and baptizing them into the Triune Name, builds it on the otherwise (that is, were it not for his church-building promise!) mushy or silly business of eating a memorial meal of bread and wine together in some kind of romantic remembrance of a moment of fellowship in a private room leased for the occasion.

And when we build our sense of ourselves as church in that way, we might well find ourselves talked about in the Gospel of John, in the long and convoluted narrative and discourse about and of Jesus in that rented private dining room. Look at John's narrative. Problem numero uno: these guys need to learn service and unlearn their elitist attitudes. So John's Jesus strips to his civvies, grabs basin and towel, and washes their feet. Stoops, grovels before those church-types, and does what none of them apparently was prepared to do, viz., to complete the preparation of the feast by washing feet. Rubbing dirt out of callouses, smoothing over half-healed blisters, rinsing the red dust of the road from feet into basin – turning that foot-bathing basin of water to blood-red liquid that would be poured out, poured out for them and for their forgiveness!

No, their sense of elitism, that there was no need for *them* to stoop and serve and wash, was a part of the setting that led

Jesus to pray for the kind of oneness that exists between him and the Father.

And then there is the traitor. There's that Judas guy, tragically convinced that he knows best what true religion requires – and true religion surely does NOT require the kind of message and presence that Jesus brings. Judas acts for all of us who know better what the truth of Christianity is, better than those poor ignoramuses “over there” who don't get it as right as we do, who don't understand religious truth and purity the way we do. Judas acts for all of us who, religiously, want what we want when we want it – and who forget the eschatological lesson that we'll get what we got when we get it (with apologies to a bad teeny-bopper joke).

When the Lord announced that one of them would betray him, they “looked at one another (13:21)” – unsure of the perpetrator, but looking *outside themselves* for the cause of treachery. In the synoptic gospels they ask, “Lord, is it I?” Here in John they look at one another, thinking, “I'll bet it's you!” They're degree-holding graduates in the school of Genesis chapter three: “It's those other guys, Lord. It's them who's got your church corrupted and divided. Why, if they'd just listen to us, agree with us, join up with us, why we'd be ONE CHURCH quicker'n a skeeter could bite a baby's cheek!” Lord, it's them, isn't it!

And the foot-washer wonders whether it isn't time to start over in civvies, with basin and towel, and wash a little more carefully, all over again!

But Jesus is oblivious to that. He intincts the bread, hands it to Judas, sends him on his way – as if to turn the dipped bread into a johnny-cake (journey-cake) for the traitor. And the rest are clueless! Clueless! Treason, like murder, will out! Now, as John tells it, Judas was never really “in,” so even his treason does not rend the seamless community. Yet, no one knows, not yet, anyway, that he's “out.” He dips. He eats. He's there. He's *here!* Lord, is it him? Lord, it's them isn't it!

No, Pogo, we have seen the enemy, and the enemy is us. The enemy is us in our elitist claims to be the one true church. The enemy is us in our share in treason, our turning of our back, our fleeing, our striking out at *them* who oppose our church-game – sorry, church-claim, I should have said.

Cut to the prayer. After an evening meal, after three chapters of talk about what lies ahead, three chapters of promises about the spirit that would after his departure lead them all into all the truth, after dealing with elitism and treachery and buck-passing, as John writes it, “After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come.’” And then we get to listen to the gospel in the form of John's witness to Christ's vision for the church. And what is Christ's vision for the church is Christ's prayer for the church is Christ's *promise* for the church. So here that promise now:

In the snippet of that prayer/vision that is our gospel for today, we hear this slice of the good [news](#):

- it's OK to be left “in the world” of divisiveness and self-assertion, but remember that that world opposed our Lord and will oppose us – it's OK, because, though we will not be transported to some starship “Enterprise” we will nevertheless be made holy, sanctified, in his true word
- we'll not be left to wander aimlessly; for he our Lord has sent us into this hostile and self-serving world as his word-bearers, nay, even as his servants who, when the “hour has come,” will with him be glorified and lifted up on the cross
- we'll not be left to wonder but we will be rendered holy, set apart, by that word of God's own truth – the only thing that can sanctify at all
- together with those who hear our testimony and who see our execution at our being-lifted-up-with-him, we'll be made one with the Lord, even as he and the Father are one
- the upshot of it all will be that even the hostile world will come to believe with us that God has sent this Jesus
- so that, wonder of wonders, not only we will be one with one another, and not only will we be one with Jesus, but also they, those huddled, teeming, hurting, dying masses who hear our bumbling fumbling stumbling witness to Jesus, will be made one with us – in all their huddled, teeming, hurting, and dying massed-ness! Receiving the bread, dipped into the cup by Christ himself. Hearing the word that we get to say in his name. Huddled, hulking, teeming, seething, hurting, wounded, dying all around us and in us and sometimes even through us
- and so we'll receive the very glory that Christ received from the Father, the heavy, weighty glory from hanging, exhausted and eventually breathless, lifted up on an executioner's cross – which is the weight of the glory, the very Godness of God
- and, ah, yes: coming to discover that the whole business of church leads, finally, to this, this final, foundational, unifying promise:
I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Gee, Lord, might that be us? Completely, perfectly one? Loved, like you? Oh, that is enough, enough, indeed!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.