

Messiah Moravian Church
May 29, 2022
Ascension Sunday, Seventh Sunday of Easter
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John 17:20-26

COMPLETELY ONE

“That they may all be one.”

We are far from that, aren't we, particularly in these current times. What has happened to us? How did we become so negative, full of angst and judgment, barring God's love from our hearts?

Perhaps some of the blame can be placed on human evolution. Professor Clifford Nass at Stanford University says, “Some people do have a more positive outlook, but almost everyone remembers negative things more strongly and in more detail.”

He goes on to say that there may be an evolutionary basis for this. Those who were “more attuned to bad things would have been more likely to survive threats and...increased the probability of passing along their genes. ... Survival requires urgent attention to possible bad outcomes but less urgency in regard to good ones.”

He also says, “We tend to see people who say negative things as smarter than people who are positive.” Hmmm....

The media doesn't help. We are presented, daily, minute by minute, with the worst events occurring in our communities, nation and the world at every turn. We are inundated with negative information.

Focusing on possible bad outcomes might have served us well during the Neanderthal times but it sure isn't helping us now. A negative mindset frequently plays havoc on our bodies and minds and certainly affects our relationship with God and each other.

“That they may be one.”

Often Jesus's High Priestly Prayer in chapter 17 has been interpreted as a plea for unity throughout Christendom or, at the very least, for denominational unity. But with an estimated 45,000 Christian denominations in the world today, how can a unified Christianity ever be more than wishful thinking? Even during Jesus's lifetime his disciples bickered over differences of opinion and positions of power. After Jesus's death his followers divided over membership requirements between Jewish and Gentile converts. And we Christians haven't stopped since!

Episcopal Bishop and scholar John Shelby Spong offers an alternative analysis of chapter 17. Jesus's prayer consists of three parts. The first is a prayer that Jesus asks for himself, the second is a prayer he prays for the disciples and the third is a prayer offered for those throughout history who will believe because of the witness of the disciples.

The primary request in this third prayer is unity among believers. But Bishop Spong asserts that the desired goal is not institutional unity, which is how the church has often interpreted this portion of the prayer. Such an interpretation is an encouragement and excuse for institutional power. Nor is the goal doctrinal unity, as various councils of the church have often implied and sought to impose.

Bishop Sprong writes, “The unity of which this prayer speaks is the oneness of the human with the divine that has been the constant theme of [John’s] gospel. It is the unity of the vine with the branches. That unity is found in understanding the divine, not as an external being, but as the essence of life. John even makes Jesus use the third- person name and title for himself to make his point: Unity comes in knowing ‘the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’ The Word of God comes from God, reveals the meaning of God and returns to God. It is a mystical experience of oneness--not a oneness in which individuality is lost, but a oneness in which individuality is affirmed, security is surrendered and new being is entered.”

Sprong suggests that Jesus offers humanity a new understanding of what it means to be human. It is a way of being in the world that understands our origins in the One, our existence as from the One, and ultimately our passage into the One. This radical expression of our humanity as being one with the divine and seeing divinity in humanity changes everything. Divinity is no longer expressed as some far-off distant supernatural being, but rather as an intimate, integral source, in which we live and move and have our being or, as Paul Tillich famously wrote, the divine is “the ground of our being.”

Saint Julian of Norwich, a 14th century woman understood this oneness in the same radical way. She insisted that we are not just created from afar by a distant Creator. We are born from the very womb of the divine. John Philip Newell writes of Julian: “This is why Julian so loves to refer to God as Mother as well as Father. She sees us as coming forth from the essence of the One who is the Source of all things. What does it mean that we are made *of* God rather than simply *by* God? In part it means that the wisdom of God is deep within us, deeper than the ignorance of what we have done. It is to say that the creativity of God is deep within us, deeper than any barrenness in our lives or relationships....”

What a difference our perceptions would make if we truly believed that we are made *of* our Creator, not just made *by* our Creator. What an astonishing declaration! You and I are made of divinity. The ability to see our fellow human beings as one with the divine has profound implications for how we relate to one another: “For as much as you do unto the least of these, you do unto me.”

As Bishop Sprong writes, “The good news of the gospel, as John understands it, is not that you—a wretched, miserable, fallen sinner—have been rescued from your fate and saved from your deserved punishment by the invasive power of a supernatural, heroic God who came to your aid.”

He continues, “There is rather an incredible new insight into the meaning of life. We are not fallen; we are simply incomplete. We do not need to be rescued, but to experience the power of an all-embracing God. Our call is not to be forgiven or even to be redeemed; it is ... a new understanding of [our common humanity].”

Jesus asks us, are we brave enough to believe that we were not just created by love, but that we are created of love, a love far beyond our abilities to imagine, a love in which we live and move and have our being.