052123 – Sermon – “That All May Be One”

Today is Ascension Sunday in the calendar of the church. It is the last time that the disciples will have Jesus with them on earth - the day, the story tells us, that he ascends to heaven. This is the last Sunday of our Easter season.

Since the beginning of Lent, Jesus has been preparing his disciples to carry on without him. Our readings have been rich and deep and sometimes challenging. Jesus, more than anyone else, knows that his time is limited. He is desperate to make sure that this band of carefully chosen students are ready to continue the mission, that they won’t stop when he isn’t there to guide them, to push them.

We have traveled through this time with those followers and I think we can understand just how difficult it would have been to believe that he was going to die. Many of us have lost parents or loved ones. Even when they are old, we find it hard to imagine a time when they won’t be there; even if they are seriously ill, we hope – and even expect – that they will recover. Even when that awful day comes, we walk around in disbelief that we really won’t see them again. Our brains get it, but our hearts aren’t ready to give up. This was the same, I am sure for those disciples.

So today, this Ascension Sunday, to me marks the day when they came to terms with the fact that Jesus had truly died, that he is not coming back in a physical sense. This is the day that they let him go. This is the day that his soul ascends to heaven and those who loved him best are left alone to carry on. How do we explain that moment in time? It is not unique to the Christian faith. Our indigenous brothers and sisters understand it too. When a loved one dies, many native traditions believe that their soul continues on a journey for a year. On that anniversary, a feast and ceremony are held to release them to the Creator. It sounds very similar to me to our marking of Jesus’ Ascension, doesn’t it? Perhaps if we celebrated this day with a ceremony and a feast, it would make it more understandable and more significant to us too.

Significant as it is, this year I have chosen not to focus on that particular event, that moment when the disciples let Jesus go, but to think instead about his last instructions to his faithful followers, the ones he left behind to carry on the work they began together. All of those readings we have been hearing over Lent and Easter, I think, carry the lessons that Jesus wanted to be certain his followers understood – the big truths about what their work was about. I understand that the letting go was important for the disciples and I believe it was a significant moment in our faith story, but it leads me to his last messages to those men, and to us. If any of this counts, it’s important that we really “get it”. He knew he was going to die and so, perhaps his last words to them were ones we need to think about the most. The readings for this Sunday highlight the Ascension story, for sure, but there are others we shouldn’t pass over.

The passage from John, that Mary read for us today, is a continuation of Jesus’ last prayer with his disciples on the night he was arrested. I often find John a little hard to follow with his poetic and mystical style of writing. At times it almost seems as if he is talking in riddles. Often, I am tempted to pass him by, but that last phrase in today’s reading, in particular, has stuck with me and had me thinking in many directions this week: “That they may all be one.”

I guess that’s not a surprise; it is fundamental to our understanding as the United Church of Canada. These words are on our church crest in two languages – the Latin, “ut omnes unum sint” which translates as “that all may be one” and also in Mohawk – “Akwe Nia’Tetewà:neren” (aw gway – nyah day day waw -nay renh) which means “All my relations”.

We pondered those two statements in our Lectionary Study this week. We wondered, “Are they the same?” and we also wondered “What do these two statements say about who we are?”

There are two big themes here, I think – unity and diversity.

When Jesus prayed that “all may be one”, he may have been talking about his followers, certainly, but I think, as the world has grown over the centuries since that prayer was written, it carries even more significance today. The diversity of human beings all over this planet that we now encounter, was unknown to the people of Jesus’ time and place. There were many forms of religion in those days, it’s true, but the kaleidoscope of religions that existed then and still today were out of their scope of experience. They hadn’t traveled to all the ends of the earth; their knowledge and understanding were bound by their experience in the only corner of the world they knew. “That all may be one” was a new concept, a huge shift in thinking, and an even bigger one today.

Notice that Jesus didn’t pray “that all be like us”; he prayed “that all may be one” – and there’s a significant difference between these two statements. The way we interpret the words makes a world of difference in how we respond.

I love that we have the two phrases on our UCC crest – and that they aren’t simply a direct translation of Jesus’ words. The Latin phrase “that all may be one” meets the Mohawk words we are familiar with today, “all my relations”. Each one is powerful in its own right – but together they add a whole new way of thinking – a way of thinking that I believe Jesus was hoping for in his prayer that night. Together, they point to the incredible and immensely complex web of life that keeps this planet viable. Together, they take us beyond thinking about unity amongst humans, into the importance of the connections in all of creation, all living things and even all of the non-living features like rocks and minerals, mountains, and deserts, that are vital to making this planet work… that all may be one… that all are part of one miraculous interconnected system that has the capacity to sustain life, that each part, no matter how big or small, is vital, not only to sustaining life, but is vital to making life abundant for all – for “all my relations”.

It's a big prayer that Jesus expressed in that upper room – bigger than those present could comprehend and bigger, I think than even we, after two thousand years of learning can truly fathom. We have come light years in scientific advancement, in global awareness, even in understanding how the universe works beyond this small blue planet – and yet, with all the discoveries and innovations we have created to improve our lives, our planet is hurting. Everywhere, the perfect balance in creation is being skewed. Forests are blazing, rivers are spilling their banks, wind and storm are changing the landscape, species are fading into extinction, disease spreads around the world, people go hungry, while others compromise their health with excess… In all the wonderful advances that have been made, I wonder if we have forgotten to balance our individual needs with the needs of all the parts of the web of life that are vital to life itself – all my relations…

Oh, to have the God’s-eye view of how creation works! It seems we know just enough to unwittingly cause harm.

Is it hopeless? I pray not.

How can we bring back that hope? Where do we begin?

It would be nice, wouldn’t it, if there was one firm step to take, one direction in which to focus our efforts? It’s a lot more complicated though… complicated but not impossible, hard but not beyond our human ability…

Perhaps the place to begin is where Jesus left off in that prayer we heard today… in building that unity he wanted so desperately for the world… “That all may be one…”

Is it possible to be “one” and yet not the same? Is it possible to make unity work without destroying the beautiful diversity that exists in the world? Is it possible? … Or perhaps the question should be this… Is it possible to even begin building God’s kin-dom in any other way?

Achieving unity is a monumental task, to be sure, but it’s one that I believe we commit to when we declare that we are followers of Jesus.

“Love your neighbour as yourself” was his commandment – not “love your neighbour if he is just like you.”

Perhaps it helps to replace that word, “neighbour” with those words on our UCC crest… “Love *all my relations* as yourself.”

In our United Church tradition, we declare that “all are welcome” that the table of communion – that table of grace – is open to all. It’s an extension of that same concept, isn’t it? When we offer someone welcome, we are offering them love – love for the person they are, not the one we wish they would be – and I think that word “welcome” is a promise to take care of them because that, too, is a way we show love.

In these days of Truth and Reconciliation, those words on our crest and the words we sing in our hymns need to be much more than lip service. They need to signal a willingness to listen, to learn, to make changes in who we are and how we interact with each other and the world. They signal an awareness that we are all connected, all related, and all loved, not in spite of our differences, but in celebration of them.

In these days of Climate Emergency, the call is the same. Our love for creation signals a willingness to take responsibility for ensuring its well-being here where we live and around the universe, for now and for the future. It’s showing love for “all my relations”, human or otherwise.

It’s a monumental commitment. Thanks be to God that we are not expected to do it all perfectly or by tomorrow morning. Jesus often reminded his disciples that following him would not always be easy – but he also reminded them that God offers grace and forgiveness. He encouraged them to be in community with one another and to take care of each other by sharing resources and making sure no one was left in need. Jesus started with twelve men, and their commitment to this way of living in love spread, even beyond his death – even to us who gather here in community, committed to making a difference where we can – in our own small world and even around the globe.

Margaret Mead is quoted as saying, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has." That should encourage us to do what we can, even if it seems small.

All around us, there are many ways we are being called to change the world – to work toward building God’s kin-dom. Ways that seem small like recycling or planting a tree, ways that seem big like reducing our carbon footprint… small things like supporting the local food bank and big things like calling for a Guaranteed Livable Income… small acts like placing a land acknowledgement at the beginning of our service or a Pride flag in the entrance way and big ones like learning about our indigenous neighbours and the Remit from General Council about the future of Native Ministries in the United Church.

Jesus prayed “that all may be one”, our United Church believes that unity includes “all my relations” The opportunities are around us to help make that prayer of Jesus come to fruition, and to make the dream of God’s kin-dom come true, if we take our commitment to follow Jesus seriously and work so that “all may be one… all my relations.”

May it be so. Amen.