

"That the World May Believe"

"... may they also be one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Mothers' Day is always a special occasion in the Parker family. Family members travel from across the country to gather on the homestead where Parkers have lived for five generations. The dinner table is extended so that it spills over into the living room, and there is enough food passed around to feed a small army. Gifts are lavished upon the increasing number of mothers who bring their children to join in this celebration. For the Parkers, Mothers' Day ranks with Christmas as one of the favourite family days of the year.

This year, Mothers' Day is extra special, because it is also the day when the family matriarch Ellen (known fondly to everyone as "Miss Ellen") will celebrate her 90th birthday. For months, family members have been asking Miss Ellen what she would like for her special birthday; but until recently, she hasn't given anyone an answer. This isn't like Miss Ellen; she's usually quick to let everyone know what she likes and the gifts she would appreciate, but this year she has kept her preferences to herself. Finally, as the big day was quickly approaching, her granddaughter Jessie approached her after a Sunday dinner and asked her, "Miss Ellen, why won't you tell anyone what you want for your birthday?"

Miss Ellen looked down lovingly at her precocious granddaughter, who reminded her of the way she was as a young girl. She bent over to whisper in her ear what she had been keeping from the rest of the family: "Jessie dear, I'm really grateful to everyone for the big fuss they're making over my birthday; but what I really want isn't something you can put in a box and wrap up in fancy paper. What I really want this year is for my family to be one, to set aside all of their bickering, and arguing, and carrying of old grudges. If you really want to give me what I want, stop your foolishness and forgive one another. *That* would make my birthday really special!" Like many families, that Parkers had their share of conflict over the years. Some of the grudges had gone on for so long that no one could remember how they started. Some members of the family could barely tolerate each other, and would often keep away from each other and sit at far ends of the table at family gatherings. There were even some members of the family who stayed away altogether, absent for years from any family reunion. These divisions had caused Miss Ellen great pain; for this milestone birthday, no other gift would be as meaningful as the gift of a reconciled, reunited family.

As he is about to face his passion and death in Jerusalem, we overhear Jesus praying to God to grant what our Lord truly desires for those who have been his family, the people he loves so dearly that he will give his very life for them. He had just gathered with his disciples for his Last Supper with them, and as he looked around the table he saw a family that was as divided as the Parkers. Peter was his usual arrogant self; Judas was plotting to betray Jesus within a matter of hours; and James and John were probably still jockeying for promotions. The disciples who gathered with Jesus in the Upper Room "*were no doubt frightened, uncertain, insecure, scrappy, and squabbling.*" (Lucy Lind Hogan). They were not the family that Jesus desired to continue to carry on his ministry and legacy; so in his final prayer before departing for the Garden of Gethsemane and the events of his Passion, Jesus prays that the Father will grant his disciples the gifts he desires for them and for those who will be blessed by the work they will accomplish in Jesus' name. Jesus prays that God will continue to "*sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*" (John 17:17), especially as they are now being sent out into the world. Knowing that they will be hated in the same manner in which Jesus was hated, he prays that God will protect them after his departure: "*I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.*" (17:15). As he has loved them as his beloved children, Jesus now asks that God will continue to watch over them so that they might be protected from "*sin, death, and the power of the devil*" – all that threatens to separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But Jesus' prayers are not only for those he has known in his earthly ministry; he expands the circle for whom he prays, praying for those who come to believe through the work of the apostles: *"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word"* (17:20). Jesus turns his attention to the world and expresses his desire that the world will come to share in the knowledge of God that marks the life of the faith community, *"that they may all be one."* (17:21). This pray for unity is at the heart of Jesus' prayer for his followers of every generation; with this request, Jesus prays that those who come to believe in him will share in the same communal identity as those who brought them to faith. *"To be a follower of Jesus is to be a part of a greater whole. According to Jesus there are to be no solitary Christians or spiritual 'Lone Rangers.'"* (Hogan).

But Jesus also understands that the unity that he desires among his followers is not something that they can accomplish on their own, because *"[human] efforts at creating unity are ineffective at best and at worst adventures in missing the point."* (Alan Brehm). As reconciliation between God and humanity could only be accomplished through God's acts in Christ, unity among those who bear the name of Jesus is a divine gift that reflects the unity that exists between the Father and Son: *"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."* (17:21). The unity for which Jesus prayers is not intrinsic in the community itself – the divisiveness among the Twelve was proof of that – but derives from the unity of Father and Son. For the community to be "one" means that they mirror the mutuality and reciprocity of the Father/Son relationship (*"But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."* – 10:38).

The oneness for which Jesus prays is not a prayer for unity for its own sake, but unity for the sake of the community's continue the work of Jesus. The community's oneness will offer a witness to the world about the revelation of God in Jesus, so that the world will come to believe what the community already believes: that Jesus is the one whom God has sent for the sake of the whole world:

- "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." – 3:17.
- "But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me." – 5:36.
- "'I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.' Then they said to him, 'Where is your Father?' Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.' – 8:18-19.

It for the purpose of this mission that Jesus not only prays that his followers might be one, but *"that they may become completely one."* The verb "to complete" (*teleioo*) is normally associated in John's Gospel with the completion of God's work (*"I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do."* – 17:4). The community's oneness will complete God's work in the same way that Jesus' life death will fulfill the will of God. It is this completeness that is Jesus' true desire for his followers; in fact, instead of using the more conventional prayer language of asking, Jesus employs the language of volition: *"Father, I desire that these also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you have loved me before the foundation of the world."* (17:24). Jesus' words express a desire for the faith community to share in the glory that he and the God shared "in the beginning," taking the reader back to the beginning of the Fourth Gospel where Jesus is identified with the very life-creating Word:

- "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." – John 1:1-5.

The hope is that the faith community will come face to face with God's love, fulfilling Paul's teaching that "now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Although this prayer comes near the end of Jesus life among his followers, his death and departure will not end his presence and work within the faith community or the world: "*I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*" (17:26). The love of God for Jesus will continue in the life of the faith community, and through this love Jesus will also be present to the community. "*The community will become the locus of God's love for the world.*" (Gail O'Day).

Our gathering on this Mothers' Day is a time for us to be especially joyful as we celebrate the baptisms of two young children whose parents, godparents, and families bring them to the waters of the Holy Sacrament through which "*we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ.*" Martin Luther teaches us that Holy Baptism "*brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare... 'We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.'* [Romans 6:5]" (*Small Catechism*). We promise that we will raise these children in our faith, "*so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and strive for justice and peace.*" It is a day in which we give thanks for all that God has done for us in Christ's death and resurrection; what God is doing today in claiming these children as his own beloved; and the promises God makes to these children and to all the baptized that we are God's sons and daughters and heirs of his eternal blessings, which are "*imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*" (1 Peter 1:4-5). On this day in which we give thanks for all mothers and those who have provided motherly care, we rejoice that these children are now also children of God, "*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*" As his beloved children, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ joins in our celebration; he also joins us in praying that these children might experience the same unity for which he prayed on behalf of his first disciples, a unity through which we all might know that God is with us always and which witnesses to the world of the love that God has for all humanity. It is a unity that can be realized only through the love of God that unites all things in God's gracious care, the love that binds us together "*with cords that cannot be broken.*"

In May 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his infant nephew Dietrich Wilhelm Rudiger Bethge on the occasion of his baptism. Bonhoeffer would have preferred to be present at the celebration of this child's baptism along with all of his family, but he writes this letter from the Nazi prison from which he would never be released, less than a year before his martyrdom shortly before the end of World War II. Bonhoeffer's message is an expression of his hopes for the nephew he would never meet, and his filled with the hope that is rooted in the promises God makes to us in Holy Baptism, promises that not even one of the evilest empires in modern history could not destroy:

- "Today you will be baptized a Christian. All those great ancient words of the Christian proclamation will be spoken over you, and the command of Jesus Christ to baptize will be carried out on you, without your knowing anything about it. But we are once again begin driven right back to the beginnings of our understanding. Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship – all these things are so difficult and so remote that we hardly venture any more to speak of them... may it be said of you on day, 'The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter till full day.' (Proverbs 4:18.)"

There were many gifts that the Parker family could have brought to Miss Ellen this year; but the one gift that would be most meaningful was not one they could wrap in festive paper with a bow on top but one they could also give by embodying it in their own lives: to seek forgiveness and reconciliation so that so that they might, in her words, “stop your foolishness and forgive one another!” There are many gifts that Henrik and Ryla will receive on this day of their baptisms; but the greatest gift is not that which family and friends will bestow on them, but the gift of God’s love and promise that they are God’s beloved children, heirs of the promises that bring to us “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.” There many gifts that we might bring as we gather as God’s people rejoicing in the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; but the gift that our Redeemer truly desires is that we might live together in the unity that God grants to us, not only for ourselves but for the sake of others, allowing the light of Christ to shine before others *“so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”* Amen.