Sermon by the Very Rev. Ian S. Markham
Preached at Good Shepherd Church, Burke, VA
August 10, 2008

Readings: John 17: 6, 15-23; Ephesians 4: 1-6

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.”

I am sure you are familiar with the old joke (one of those moveable feasts that can be applied to all sorts of different groups) so let us pick two fundamentalist pastors. They are shipwrecked on a deserted island. Several years later they are rescued. As the rescue party lands, they discover that there are two churches on this island – one at either end. And both pastors are claiming to have founded a new international ministry.

As with all humor, this gets to an important point. We disagree with each other with ease. We move fairly rapidly to a point of principle that makes it essential for us to walk apart. We find living with disagreement difficult. There is almost something rather enjoyable about disagreeing and the appropriate almost ‘righteous’ indignation we feel. The temptation to give up on the struggle of conversation across a divide where we are sure the other is wrong is often overwhelming. The history of the Christian Church is a testimony to the ease with which we disagree and divide. It is easier than staying in conversation.

Here we are on Anglican Communion Sunday. For many Episcopalians, the Communion is an exhausting, rather embarrassing entity. In 1776, Americans learned that foreigners are not entitled to interfere in the affairs of America, and yet, the Communion seems to spend all its time interfering in the American Church. There are many Episcopalians who feel that this is an outmoded entity. I want to suggest this morning that the Communion is an important reality for a whole host of reasons.
First, Americans played an important role in creating the Anglican Communion and were the prime movers behind the first Lambeth. The argument that made the Communion important was this: while the Episcopal Church might be small in the American church market, the Anglican Church worldwide is large. And this is true. Worldwide Anglicans are the third largest denomination in Christendom (after the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox churches, the Anglicans come in third with 80 plus million). Americans wanted this link – they wanted to illustrate that Anglicanism was avoiding the extremes of Geneva and Rome and returning to the purer theology of the early church. And in the early church, the bishops would meet from time to time. So the Americans persuaded the Archbishop in 1867 to convene the first Lambeth conference.

Second, being part of an international family makes us sensitive to the different demands facing the family. It is commonplace to distinguish between Muslim-majority provinces and Secular-majority provinces. The Muslim majority provinces cannot afford for Anglicanism to be linked with an affirmation of homosexuality; the Secular majority provinces need to reach out and provide a pastoral ministry to everyone regardless of sexual orientation. One discovery at Lambeth 2008 was that these cultural differences are every bit as important as Scripture in understanding the depth of feeling on both sides of the debate.

Third, with mobility around the globe on an increase, Anglicans need the familiar as they move from country to country. I have stood and sung ‘All things bright and beautiful’ in India – suddenly connected to a people in a shared liturgy.

The American Church must continue to struggle with the Anglican Communion. We need conservative voices to keep us faithful to revelation of God in Christ; and we should be willing to spend time explaining and interpreting from the vantage point of the Eternal Word disclosed in Christ why we take the positions we do.
At this point it might be objected that this is another rant for the God of inclusivity. Surely there must be boundaries? We don’t want to say that the unrepentant Nazi deserves affirmation and inclusion in this congregation.

This is a good question. And our readings today are part of the response. The author of Ephesians (sadly probably not Paul) sets out the basics. We share a faith in our Lord Jesus, one baptism, and one Creator God; these convictions are the basis of our unity. When we reaffirm our faith in the Nicene Creed, we reaffirm our faith in the Trinity and in the disclosure of the Eternal Word in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (it is interesting how most of the creed tells us the story of that life.) This creed captures the basis for unity that we are called to live within – and note how it doesn’t mention sexuality or even a view of Scripture. Living within the framework of the creed is the basis of our unity. So there is a boundary for this inclusion; we do build on these basics.

So turning now to the Gospel. When Jesus in the Gospel prays to the Father that “we all might be one”, what does this mean? Being one does not mean being in agreement about everything. Disagreements are inevitable. They occur in a marriage, in a congregation, in an office, and in a nation. They occur because we are human – seeing things from different vantage points, weighing the factors in different ways. God – in creation - has made it inevitable that we are going to disagree about issues. So it cannot mean complete agreement at all times.

No instead – when Paul addresses the Church of Corinth – he captures the meaning of Jesus’ request for ‘us to be one’ by exhorting us to be united in our disagreement. Grounded in our Nicene basics, we live together with a thousand and one disagreements. It is an important witness we need to provide the world. So many parts of the world demonstrate the tragic consequences of people unable to live with disagreement as principle expresses itself in sectarian violence. We need to witness to the possibility of living together with disagreement. We need to demonstrate a capacity to converse while thinking the other is mistaken. We need to show that we can transcend schism and division.
Another objection might arise. Sometimes disagreements take the form of violence or force. Sometimes separation is a necessary strategy for survival.

This is true. But the goal for the Christian is to invite the peace of the Lord to make a difference. The moment of the peace is a crucial liturgical moment. It is not the seventh inning shuffle. Learning to live with disagreement is also learning to live with the peace of the Lord. There is a real beauty in this moment. Not only are we supposed to use the moment to reflect on all those who are driving us crazy at the office – indeed recommit to seeking to bring peace to that relationship; but in the symbolic moment of shaking the hand of someone near you, you reach out to all those you are disagreeing with – feel hurt by – were damaged by - in the past. We invite those moments of past hurt to no longer damage us or hurt us. We invite the peace of the Lord to bring healing to that past. We move on – in unity with those who are different, who have hurt us, with whom we strongly disagree.

One last joke: St. Peter is showing a new arrival to heaven around. “Here are those who love art,” he says pointing to a group of painters. “There are the philosophers; over there are some of the musicians. In the distance you can see those enjoying golf.” Meanwhile our new arrival noticed that as St. Peter was walking around there was a rather big building at the edge of heaven. “What is that building for?” our new arrival asked. “Oh that,” said St. Peter, “that is where we put the Baptists – they like to think they are the only ones here.”

Being one is an anticipation of heaven. Being one is our small response to the prayer of Jesus. Being one brings healing to the pain and hurt that damaged human relationships can cause. Being one is the purpose of the Communion. Being one is the hard work of the Communion.

Amen