

Sermon

May 8, 2016 | The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Text: John 17:20-26 | Preacher: Peter Lane

Good Morning. Happy Mother's Day to those of you who are mothers. Thank you for the sacred work you do. It should also be said that today is hard for some, including those who mourn a mother's death, those who mourn a difficult relationship with their mother, or those who desire to be a mother but are not. Grace and peace to you on this day.

Nine of us from St. Paul & the Redeemer have just returned from the mountains of Southern Haiti and a visit with our partners at St. Patrick's Church and school in Tom Gateau. The faithfulness of the people of St. Patrick's in the face of real hardship is humbling, their love for one another a reminder of the joys of community, the care they take with the liturgy something towards which we can aspire.

Your generosity is making a real difference in lives there. On September 13, on Haiti Sunday, you all gave \$21,000. Every month, a portion of that money is wired down to pay three women to cook lunch for the whole school three times each week. Since the lunch program started, enrollment in the school has increased by almost 50 students, now to over 200 in PK - 6th grade. Why? The teachers told us that parents look for a school that serves food. Thank you for your generosity. In Lent, you gave \$7,000 to go towards those teachers' salaries. That allows the school to exist, to be an anchor in the community, a functional institution in a country desperate for them. Thank you for your generosity. A few years ago we gave musical instruments and this year we took down 9 more—flutes, clarinets, saxophones and a trombone. The band of Tom Gateau is awesome. They even played Halle, Halle, Halle, loudly!

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus prays for us. At first, it seems to put a heavy burden on us as Jesus' followers. Jesus' prays that those of us who believe because of the witness of the initial disciples may become completely one, so that the world may know that God sent Jesus and that God loves us. Our unity the proof that Jesus is of God? No pressure. It is such a hard ask because human nature doesn't promote unity. Think of the squabbling in the Anglican communion. But Jesus' prayer is not all law. It is also grace. Jesus says that we will be empowered to do it. He prays, "The glory that you (God) have given me (Jesus) I have given them (us)."

God gave Jesus glory. Jesus gives us that same glory. And so we can live towards the unity for which Jesus prays.

A little history. The Episcopal Church in Haiti is part of the Episcopal Church in the United States. And it is not so simple as it being the church of a colonial power. The Episcopal Diocese of Haiti was founded in 1861 when African American Episcopal Priest James Holly led 110 parishioners from New Haven to Haiti. They were seeking, in part, a reprieve from the racism of this country. When we go to Haiti we are going to a fellow Episcopal church. We go with our visions. We work at listening to theirs. And sometimes we struggle to provoke vision in a people whose horizon is often the next meal for their children. SPR's relationship to St. Patrick's allows us to move towards the unity for which Jesus prayed.

Let me tell you about three Haitians we met. Sophonie is a teacher. Virmyr is a 6th grader. Valencia is about three. In telling their stories, I hope to highlight three elements of our oneness: solidarity, human sacredness, and the common call we all share in baptism.

Sophonie Midy is the teacher in the classroom for the 3-year-olds. Some 30 of them sit in these tiny rattan chairs in a 10'x10' cement room. The sounds of Sophonie singing a line and all of the little voices repeating it back streamed out when we arrived. Sophonie wears the same formal uniform as all the teachers. She is young and wants a better life for herself and for those little kids. How should we relate to Sophonie? For one, I think we should share some of our abundance with her, and we do. But not just that. One of our parishioners, theologian Mike Hogue, wrote a number of years ago something I find very helpful in thinking about how to relate to Sophonie and others of the world's vulnerable. We ought to be in solidarity with Sophonie. Mike points out that the first thing that might mean is listening to her. It is a challenge. Not only the language. We must allow her vision of the world to influence ours. This kind of solidarity would mean interpreting the world empathically, collaboratively. This solidarity also means doing shared projects. Like the school there perhaps? If we can see the world collaboratively with Sophonie and share service to the most vulnerable then we will be in solidarity (Hogue, *After the Secular*,

366-69). It would be an answer to Jesus' prayer that we all may be one.

Virmyr Durandisse is a 6th-grader with charm. He touched my stony, pragmatic heart. He sought me out, looked me in the eye, and shook my hand. We communicated as best we could without speaking the same language, mostly by me taking photos. These kids almost never see a photo of themselves. They, like us, love it. Later Virmyr sought me out again but had this time commandeered Rudy, the terrific translator and friend that meets up with us each time we are in Haiti. Virmyr was surrounded by the other boys from his class, all clearly admiring his bravery in approaching the foreign priest so directly. He explained to me that he and 5 others were going to graduate from sixth grade and would have to leave to go to a secondary school. They wanted to have a celebration of their success. (And if you calculate just how few make it to 6th grade, you can see that it is a great success.) His class wanted to have a celebration with the whole school but they could not afford it. He gave me a budget for this proposed celebration and asked if I would pay for it. I wanted to hand him the money right there. But my pragmatic side didn't want to set a bad precedent or play favorites or go outside the established partnership agreements. Thankfully Char and Gail and others called me to recognize the divine spark in Virmyr. To respond to it. Marilynne Robinson, in an essay about John's gospel, encourages us to remember, "the profound and unique sacredness of human beings as such" (Robinson, *Givenness of Things*, 222). How could I not recognize bravery and planning and joy? I hope they enjoy their celebration. I enjoyed the opportunity to give and the reminder of the importance of mutual recognition of sacred humanity. As humans, we share high hopes. I believe when we seek to recognize those in each other, Jesus' prayer that we all may be one is answered.

Valencia Beaubrun is about three-years-old. Last Sunday, it was our great privilege to be present for her baptism. Let me set the scene. The original church building fell down in the 2010 Earthquake. The

frame of a church has been rebuilt. Cement pillars surround a cement slab and hold a corrugated metal roof. I love worshipping outside like that, up in the mountains, with the breeze blowing through. But to be clear, they don't like it. To them a real church has walls. In a real church, stray dogs don't run through and people don't do who-knows-what there at any time of day or night. I'm learning to understand. They would like to build walls. But imagine the scene, high in the mountains, a rickety table for an altar, water in a large bowl held by an acolyte. (There is not running water, so someone had carried those gallons.) The family came forward. Well dressed. Two parents. One godparent. An older sibling. And young Valencia Beaubrun, perhaps 3 years old. Not that different from Jen, James, Emily, Lucy, and Anne. Fr. Milor asked those parents and godparent the exact same questions I asked, but in French. Valencia was baptized. After the baptism, the family put Valencia into a beautiful white baptismal gown to represent her belatedness in the eyes of God. Valencia's baptism last Sunday and Anne's today offer them and us a common call: to renounce that which draws us away from the love of God, to continue to break bread together, to seek and serve Christ in all persons... In the different ways Valencia and Anne will respond that common call, Jesus' prayer for unity is answered.

That we all may be one. That is Jesus' prayer. It is not easy. But in solidarity, in recognition of our common sacred humanity, and in responding to a common call, we live it out. Thank God for the grace granted us which empowers us to live together.

Amen.

Sources:

Hogue, Mike. 2010. "After the Secular." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 no 2: 346-374.

Robinson, Marilynne. 2015 *The Givenness of Things*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.