Sermon for The Third Sunday After Pentecost

(Readings from The Seventh Sunday of Easter - transferred)

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, June 30, 2019

Text: John 17:20-26

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus concludes his final discourses to his disciples with a prayer that sings of unity. Jesus is praying not only for his disciples, but for all those who are to come. We are invited directly into a unity with God as Trinity and with each other:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they all may be one.... As you, Father are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us... I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you loved me.

This unity has a heightened poignancy and urgency in the context of Jesus’ knowledge of his impending suffering and death on the cross. He shows that the very nature of God is trustworthy and ever-present. There is a connection here that transcends time and place, human and divine.

But here’s the rub: while I resonate with these words on a fundamental level, I also find them a bit perplexing and radically counter-cultural. Our daily world is rooted in a need for separate-ness on so many levels – certainly as individual, as members of various religions, ethnicities or nationalities, divided by sexual preference or gender identification – the list goes on. How do we transcend the individual into shared experience and love? And with our focus on individual identity, are we really sure we want to?

In spite of our human propensity to delineate self from other, we are equipped with great capacity to connect. Ours is a language of narrative – of shared experiences, the creation of personal fables woven from the fabric of our lives, spoken to illuminate a greater truth. We are, at our core, meaning-making creatures. In our rich liturgy every week, we seek unity with the church of the past and present, with believers and all of humanity through our prayers, our songs, our breaking of bread and sharing of wine. It is a connection into the timelessness and constancy of God in the timelessness of
shared humanity. Jesus articulated this connection to others and to God throughout the span of time in John’s Gospel.

One part of our liturgy that has become increasingly important to me is the way we ponder the power of the stories within scripture. There is emerging scientific research to support our ability to connect through stories. In the early 1990s, Italian researchers accidentally discovered mirror neurons in monkeys. They inserted electrodes into a monkey’s brain to determine which areas were activated when reaching for a nut. It turned out that the same areas of the test monkey’s brain were also activated when watching another monkey pick up a nut. Many researchers now believe the same processes are at work in humans. In fact, hearing or seeing a story has been shown to trigger the same emotional responses that we might have as if we ourselves were directly experiencing those events. It seems we are not only wired to connect with stories we hear, we are also wired to tell them. Graham Swift eloquently described this human need for storytelling in his novel Waterland:

Man-let me offer you a definition-is the storytelling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker buoys and trail signs of stories. ...Even in his last moments, t’s said, in the split second of a fatal fall – or when he’s about to drown – he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life.

In those moments when I have felt lost or mired in chaos, I have turned to stories. One story in particular has grounded me in the midst of great uncertainty and its retelling has gifted me with the ability to reach others. It is not an easy story, but it is a story that reminds me of God’s abiding presence with us and among us.

The year is 1966. A husband and wife are quietly watching tv. They are what some people would crassly describe as dirt poor. Only the first floor in their drafty house is heated. The only room with running water is the kitchen. They are relegated to using an outhouse or carrying heated water from the kitchen to a tub to bathe.

The couple’s history is complex. After years in an abusive family, then shuffled between foster families, the woman was persuaded by the brash, handsome man at her side to leave high school to marry. After their second child was born, he succumbed to his restlessness and lived with another woman for 6 weeks before returning home. With mounting bills and no regular work, he burglarized a local garage, then evaded police by fleeing to Florida. Eventually he was caught and was convicted at
trial; while serving his sentence, the woman gave birth to their third child. After his early release on good behavior, he skipped out on parole. The woman found out in his absence that she was pregnant with their fourth child. He was found, and arrested again; in an act of clemency, perhaps pity for this young mother’s plight, the husband’s parole officer worked diligently for his release. And now they are uneasily reunited.

Normally she is a blur of activity, but she has had some trouble with this pregnancy and she is heeding her doctor’s advice to rest. She cannot shake the sense of unease. She feels pelvic discomfort and discovers she is bleeding. The labor pains begin in earnest. She crawls into the bathtub and passes a large mass. She begs her husband to take her to the hospital. He walks to his parents, who live across the street. His mother, convinced that the woman has just delivered a stillborn, advises her son that a trip to the hospital is not necessary. Thanks be to God, he listens to his wife’s pleas, and drives her to the hospital.

In shock from her significant blood loss, the young mother remembers nothing until the labor room. She has ice on her abdomen; she is told to absolutely not move a muscle. She does not understand that she has just received a blood transfusion. She does not understand the measures being taken to keep her alive. She does understand that she still has her baby.

Her labor staved off for now, she is wheeled down a white hallway. She closes her eyes, thinks about dying, and wonders who will love and care for her children. Just as she passes a window, the glorious sun breaks through the clouds. She remembers the light to this day. Suddenly, so clearly, she hears these words from the Psalms: *Be still and know that I am God.* And as she is instructed to remain as still as possible, she breathes these words over and over. *Be still. Be still.* Her mantra, her continual prayer: *Be still and know that I am God.*

After a day of bed rest, she feels her heart racing and hits her call button. As the nurse comes into her room, the young mother steps out of her body. Everything is dark and her ears are filled with her horrible breathing. *Be still and know that I am God.* She has no fear. *Be still and know that I am God.* A few hours later, she is in full labor, and delivers a baby who weighs a mere 1 lb. 4 oz. After too many hours, she is taken to see her child, a frail and tiny girl in an incubator. She is upset and protests that the interns are touching her baby while she cannot. A few hours after returning to her room, a nun walks in to tell her tersely that her child has died. As she agrees to a baptism and starts to cry, the nun asks, “Why are you crying? You already have three at home.”

Later, too ill to attend the graveyard service for her lost child, she mourns. *Be still and know that I am God.* And out of those words, repeated countless times during her ordeal, emerges the presence of
a God who intimately know the anguish of watching a child die. She knows she is loved beyond measure and will never be alone. She rests in the knowledge that her life and suffering are known to God, and she is held in God’s love, compassion, and care.

This story has been related to me many times. I have often resisted its greater truth, hiding behind the pain of its context. The young mother in this story is my mother; the child is my sister, Twila, whose middle name - Jane - I now bear.

I have held my mother’s story close when I have been too angry or hurt to find my own voice lifted in prayer. Other times as I marvel at the beauty of the natural world on a hike or watch the land curve beneath me while in flight, all I can muster is, “Be still and know that I am God.” What power in a single line from the Psalms, amplified through my mother’s own story, transcending her time and place into my very present! Her story contains within it a retelling of the story of our scriptures, which also transcend time and place. And when I share my mother’s story with others, I can see the same light of recognition, of hope that God will abide with them also in the midst of their suffering and loss.

So I wonder, what prayers have sustained you? What stories could you tell that bear witness to the constancy of God, to Jesus’ call to unity, not only to our community but to a broader world in dire need of hope and love?

I pray we all find the courage to share our stories, and to see the change we may bring as beacons of hope and unity in this world.