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# We Are One in the Spirit

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A Sermon By  
Ms. Marianne Allison

May 8, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

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The Seventh Sunday of Easter  
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I want us to visit briefly the upper room that is the setting of John's Gospel today. Imagine a quiet, still place, with locked doors to keep the hostile forces of the world out. Jesus is speaking in hushed tones, and his disciples are attending to every word he says. This is the setting for the very last words Jesus says to his disciples before the events of the arrest and trial begin. Jesus alone comprehended what chaos and violence was ahead—he must have chosen his words very, very carefully.

And this is evident from clues in the reading. Pick up your bulletin and note the restatement of his message about “oneness” three times in the first paragraph. And then there is the repetition of the words, “so that,” three times: “*So that* the world may know that you have sent me.” “*So that* the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” Etc. Devices like these are common in the Bible to emphasize an essential truth--to avoid any ambiguity about God's purpose or intent.

Indeed, this short passage summarizes everything God wished to accomplish in the incarnation of Jesus in the world. It is like this hymn we still sing:

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.  
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored,  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. We are one.* Isn't this a truth that our soul just knows? It is revealed in our Scripture, but is also at the heart of almost every great religious and spiritual tradition. And science now affirms it. A National Geographic article last year by Karel and Iris Schrijver, who are, respectively an astrophysicist and pathologist, says: “Everything we are, and everything in the universe and on Earth, originated from stardust, and it continually floats through us, even today. All the material in our bodies originates with that residual stardust, and it finds its way into plants, and from there into the nutrients that we need for everything we do, think, move, and grow.” We are one. From stardust we come, and to stardust we return. We know this in our bones— because our bones are one, too!

*And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.* We pray this because, despite the truth of our oneness in Christ, we fail to live in unity with Christ and each other. We live as if we are separate from God and from one another. In fact, we build and sustain institutions intentionally to separate ourselves from God and from our neighbor. This failure is the source of great injustice and tragedy in the world. And it is also part of my family story.

When I was a child, I came to understand my father was descended from slave-owners. I don't remember how I came to know it—it wasn't something we talked about. Then one day I learned that we had an African-American assistant principal at my junior high school with the name

Andrew Allison. This was my brother's name. This was my grandfather's name. And it was the name of my great-great-grandfather, who came to this country from Scotland, and married the daughter of a slave-owning family. So one day I asked my father, "do you think this Andrew Allison could be the descendant of slaves owned by our ancestors?" And my father looked at me and said, "No. No, I don't think that is possible. And I never want you to say that to anyone, ever." Well. End of conversation.

Now, I grew up during the Civil Rights era. There was a lot of racial tension in my school. I think my father was afraid I would say something that would hurt someone or even get me hurt. And, he was a supporter of Civil Rights, and participated in the movement. He may have been ashamed. Anyway, I set the whole question aside, for a very long time.

Then, when the Black Lives Matter movement started, I was confronted with how little real progress has been made since my childhood. Oh, we have changed some laws. But there is no peace. There is no justice. There is no reconciliation. I thought about how many racists are still among us. You know: Confederate flag-wavers, white supremacists... "What is wrong with these people? Why can't their hearts be changed?", I said to myself. I observed with great pain that people of color who are still victims of racism and racist institutions are being told that we live in a post-racial society. And I heard them talk about "white fragility," the defensiveness which white people still bring to the conversation of race, that makes talking about it so difficult. I began to pray this question: If I'm not not one of *those* racists, and I'm not myself a victim of racism, then how *am* I implicated?

I think observing this as a problem between *other* people was holding me back. One thing no one else can do for me is confront my own story. Desmond Tutu said, "True reconciliation is based on forgiveness, and forgiveness is based on true confession, and confession is based on penitence, on contrition, on sorrow for what you have done." I realized that in order to participate in racial reconciliation, the confession of my family's truth had to come out. Avoiding the reality of ancestral slave-owning may imply that racism of the past is disconnected to the present. It is also *suppression* of truth, truth that the ancestors of those who were enslaved deserve, for the sake of their own healing. I realized this was the work I needed to do.

It turns out that many people are tracing slavery in their heritage, African-American and white people alike—and they need each other. I found an organization called Coming to the Table, that brings people together to support each other in this work, with the hope that in finding the truth together, we can begin this work of reconciliation. In fact, the genealogist who is helping me, Sharon, is descended from enslaved people from Mississippi counties adjacent to those where my ancestors lived. Last time we spoke, she revealed to me that she had found the slave registry of an ancestor, probably the uncle or great-uncle of my great-great-grandmother. There were over 100 enslaved people on the registry and one entry was of a female. She had 20 children. Thirteen of them were mulatto--of mixed race.

Now we may never know for sure if the white father of so many of her children is my ancestor. It could have been an overseer, I suppose. But that's unlikely. Do you see where this is going? The terror and division of slavery becomes a family matter for me. These are my kin, and at least one of them was—a rapist, not to put too fine a point on it. Also among my kin were mothers, who had had to teach their children—also my kin—how not to get on the wrong side of a white person, so they wouldn't get stopped, or harassed, or lynched, or shot. Now, before I learned this, God knew

that I was already one with this rapist and this mother both, because God is the source of all oneness. But now I am experiencing this brokenness as part of *my* story. I sense God is saying to me: “Now do you see why I call my people to the table to be reconciled as one? Now do you see that you are one of those that I call?” “Yes, Lord. I see!”

*And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.* I am just beginning this journey, and I want to be honest—it is already overwhelming. The amount of research is immense. And emotionally, I feel vulnerable in this process. I hope to meet one of the ancestors of people enslaved by mine, and I wonder what it will be like to stand face to face with them. How could there not be anger? Or shame? Also, I have cousins who will not want me to do this work. I am sorry to say they believe that our slave-owning ancestors were “different.” Why do I want to hold up the family name to criticism?, they’ll ask. This, then, is delicate work. I trust that it will bring me closer to God; I pray that it will bring me closer to others; but there will be pain along the way. We will all need healing.

We have heard that we are created as one people in unity with God. We have heard that the Word was incarnated in Jesus because our ancestors struggled to believe they were beloved by God, and that that exact same belovedness connected them to their neighbor. But we are not God. We are not Jesus. We are merely human. And so I stand before you in humility, preaching this message while I am myself caught up with everybody else in the web of brokenness that comes from our separation from God and from our neighbor. The good news is that Jesus knows this, and loves us in our all our messed-up humanity. Love brings us back into unity with Christ. We receive that love first so that we may forgive ourselves, then face the truth about who we have been separate from, and speak the truth in love to our neighbor. We make a fresh start, approaching our neighbor with an open and honest heart to begin the work of reconciliation that only love makes possible. Still, Jesus knows this work is hard and makes us vulnerable. That’s why his words today, are really a prayer, that God be with us in it, just as there is also a prayer embedded in this song:

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
We pray that all unity may someday be restored  
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.*

Amen.