

## Yearning For God's Wholeness

### 5 - Strength for the Journey

2 Chronicles 6:12-17, 30-33, 39-42, 7:1-3

John 17:1-5, 10-11, 20-23

October 2, 2010

World Communion Sunday

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

This is the other Lord's Prayer, offered in Jerusalem after Jesus' last supper and before his arrest. The Prayer where the Lord Jesus prays for us to be one, as he and the Father are one, in order that the world may come to believe. Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple wrote in his profound commentary on John's Gospel, with this high priestly prayer of Jesus, "We now come to what is... the most sacred passage even in the four Gospels."<sup>i</sup>

You and I are partial, broken, incomplete. We yearn for wholeness, unity, reconciliation, in our divided split, sinful lives; within ourselves, in our life with others, in our life with God. Remember Humpty Dumpty? Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again. But what all the king's horses and all the king's men, and all the armies and governments and therapists and doctors and counselors and vacations and hobbies could not and cannot do, Jesus Christ can. He can put us together again.

Jesus Christ, through his great sacrificial love expressed for us in the Cross and Resurrection shows us, and is for us, the way to such wholeness, reintegration within and without. As Paul writes the Corinthians, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; everything old has passed away; behold, everything has become new!"<sup>ii</sup> The Church, which is his body, is called to be the laboratory for such wholeness. The Church is called to model, as we say in the Nicene Creed, and in our Presbyterian Book of Order Foundations, "Unity, Holiness, Catholicity, Apostolicity." We exercise becoming – up, out, together. We sing in the great old hymn, "We are not divided, all one body we, one in hope and doctrine, one in charity."

But across our history from earliest days to now we fragment, we break, we divide. We repeat the terrible scandal of division. In the Book of Acts there was early on fragmentation between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. In the early Church there was fragmentation between East and West over definitions of just precisely how Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Later on, at the Reformation, just precisely how he is present in this Holy Communion. In the church I served in Bowling Green, KY, there was fragmentation, division at the time of the civil war. One church ripped into two. South Highland – 1915 – ripped in two over theology and personality. Then again in the 1970's over women in leadership. So it has gone. We Presbyterians have done more than our fair share to be part of the problem instead of part of the solution.

We all fall short of Jesus' prayer that we become one so the world may believe. And to the degree that we do we thus diminish the effectiveness of our witness to the watching and

needy world. Yet we can never let go of that vision of unity. We can never cease trying. In this Holy Supper we are given the gift in Christ himself of just how high and wide and deep and vast is this wholeness Christ offers us, wholeness out of which we are called and empowered and enabled to live into the midst of a broken, fallen, divided world, even tragically, all too often, a broken, fallen, divided Church.

These are hard times. Families are struggling. Some of you are struggling with broken relationships, poor health, lost jobs, foreclosed homes. Natural disasters, earthquakes, tornadoes, worldwide economic uncertainty, high unemployment, governments not working, a political culture and a public culture that are divided and pulling further and further apart, seemingly unwilling and unable to hear the other side and come to an *e pluribus Unum* - out of many one compromise. Then a church that is repeating patterns of division.

We need Jesus Christ himself, as he offers himself in this holy banquet of himself, his body given, his blood shed, to pull us together again, so that then we have both the inner strength and the outer tenacity to sustain us and are able to help other people get back together again. “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent... Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.”

Let me tell you about two monasteries I visited in the Middle East. Monastery One is the Orthodox Monastery of Mar Saba, 14 ½ miles out in the desert east of Bethlehem in sight of the Dead Sea. I visited this ancient Monastery during my sabbatical in 2009. Founded by Saint Saba of Cappadocia in the year 439, there once were over 4,000 monks living here. Today about 50 from varying branches of Eastern Orthodoxy live here, Russians, Greeks, Serbians. Despite a reputation for hospitality women are never allowed to enter the monastery, and the female school principal from Australia who was along with the priest from New Zealand and me had to wait for us in a little women’s building on the other side of the ravine.

A young Russian Orthodox monk showed us through and explained various traditions of the monastery. He was friendly enough as he pointed to a row of large framed photographs of the Orthodox Patriarchs of Jerusalem, including the current one. I recognized him and I responded, “Oh, I saw him last Sunday over at the Roman Catholic Church where I attended a service of prayers for Christian Unity and Peace in the Middle East that included all the leaders of the varied Churches in Jerusalem and Bethlehem – Orthodox, Armenian Coptic, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, all together praying for peace in the Middle East between the Jews and the Palestinians.”

The young Russian monk said, “No he could not be there.” I said, “Well, he was. I saw him. I heard him pray.” The monk said, “It is not possible. He could not pray with others who are not Orthodox.” I repeated, to no avail, that I saw him, I heard him, he prayed. Then I added, “What about the prayer of Jesus in John 17 that we may all be one in order that the world might believe?” The monk responded, “Yes, that all Orthodox may be one, that is what Jesus meant.” You wonder why there is not yet peace in the Middle East?

Monastery Two is the Monastery of St. Macarius, located in the Egyptian Desert 90 miles northwest of Cairo, which I visited last summer. This is a Coptic Monastery, even older than Mar Sarb. St. Macarius was founded in 360 A.D. and also housed over 4,000 monks in its heyday. In modern times, until 1969 only 5 or 6 monks were left there, and the monastery was largely in ruins. But in 1969 an abbot named Father Matta El-Meskeen came with 12 monks and began to restore the ruined monastery. They built new quarters for 150 monks who fill those rooms today, together with new barns, kitchen, garages, repair shops. They irrigated the desert lands and began growing figs, grapes, mangos, bananas, and other crops. They began raising cows, buffalo, sheep and poultry.

Steve Jones, of Southside Baptist and I were warmly welcomed here. Women were also visiting. The monks were friendly, laughing a lot, animated. We had an engaging long lunch with our host, Brother Macarius, who was trained as an architect. These monks live by a flexible set of rules and make many of their own decisions about daily life - when they will pray, when they will work, when they will eat. Here was an altogether different spirit than I experienced in the other monastery. This is what a little booklet about the monastery says,

“The only law of the monastery is love, without rules or limitations, as it was revealed to us on the cross. This love is at once the motive and aim of all our actions, efforts and sacrifices, and most of the monks have acquired a profound experience of the divine love.”<sup>iii</sup>

“Any perceptive visitor notices the united spirit of all the monks as well as the clear personality of each. In this way spiritual men are formed among us, who have acquired an experience of God and know how to be spontaneously led by the inner light of the Spirit. It is men of this kind that the world needs.”

“We have no rules of penance or set method of chastisement, for love is more effective than any disciplinary measure. Our sense of being pilgrims in the world makes it easy for us to submit to each other out of love for Christ.”<sup>iv</sup>

If I had not experienced precisely what the booklet describes I would say that it was just propaganda. What I experienced was the power of a love for Jesus Christ that inspired these patterns of gracious daily living. The booklet described the unifying power of the communion meal they celebrate each Sunday as being at the heart of their identity.

“Our community is transformed by this celebration of the Eucharist from a purely human gathering into the actualization of the Body of Christ. This is why the liturgy for us, cannot be said by an individual or even by a section of the community; it is essentially the meeting of the whole community, gathered as the Church around the Lamb offered at his wedding feast.”<sup>v</sup>

Even so today we come to this table to actualize the Body of Christ, to create a space of unity in a world of division, a sprig of hope in a field of despair. In the middle of Five Points

across from the fountain of the frogs and the statue of Presbyterian Pastor Brother Bryan, known for his love for the least, the lonely and the lost of Birmingham. There in that place today, and all around the world, amid all our characters, bars, tattoo parlors, gourmet restaurants, and apartments, a table is being set. A meal is being offered. Bread for the wilderness, wine for the journey. The promise of God to reunite and restore and make whole, us and all things. This table is a vision, a sign and symbol, of what God intends and is at work doing in you and me and all.

In his wonderful book on Ephesians, John MacKay, a Scotsman who was for many years President of Princeton Seminary, describes how God spoke to him in his youth as he was up in the Scottish Highlands, and Jesus Christ became a personal presence to him, and his imagination began to glow with the cosmic significance of Jesus Christ.

“I had a new outlook, new experiences, new attitudes to other people. I loved God. Jesus Christ became the center of everything... The only way in which life makes sense to me now, in the objective realm of history, drives from this conviction: that the Christian Church which confesses her Lord and strives after unity in Him, which unity becomes manifest today as the most universal and the most beneficent reality in history, is itself the core and the true pattern of God’s Order in this world, and the promise and pledge of the final consummation of all things in Christ in the world which is to come.”

Here at this table our yearnings are satisfied, our souls nourished, our divisions ended. Come! Be made whole!

“I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved, and free, in awe and wonder to recall His life laid down for me.

I come with Christians far and near to find, as all are fed the new community of love in Christ’s communion bread.”

---

<sup>i</sup> William Temple, Readings in St. John’s Gospel, p.293

<sup>ii</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>iii</sup> Welcome to the Monastery of St. Macarius, p. 14

<sup>iv</sup> Welcome to the Monastery of St. Macarius, p.16

<sup>v</sup> Welcome to the Monastery of St. Macarius, p. 26