

Pentecost 12A  
 September 7, 2011  
 Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's San Jose

Exodus 12:1-14 Institution of the Passover. Identity as community of God  
 Psalm 149  
 Romans 13:8-14 'Do not live in quarreling and jealousy. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ'.  
 Matthew 18:15-20 If another member of the church sins against you...

Today's lessons explore the Radical Unity you and I are called to live by as followers of Jesus Christ.

Being people of faith is raised to a very high level in our readings today. Scripture is not imposing a rule that if we are Christians, we should be nice to each other; or that we should all just learn to get along. Scripture says that as people of faith, Jesus' Spirit lives in each of us. Because the Spirit of Jesus lives in us, we are freed from falling victim to division that comes out of jealousy, or pride, or anger, or fear. This doesn't mean that these motives never cross our minds; it means that we have a strength living in us that can keep us from falling victim to them. We do not have to be slaves to these things that can tear a family apart, or tear a faith community apart, or tear a church denomination apart.

The NRSV translation of Matt 18:20 says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name..." The NLT of Matt 18:20 says, "Where two or three gather together because they are mine, I am there among them." If we belong to Jesus, if we have dedicated ourselves to taking on the mind of Christ, if as Paul says, we 'put on Christ', then we should honor Christ in us; and we should honor Christ in each other. We should honor Christ in the believer we disagree with.

When you and I choose faith in Jesus Christ, we have entered into a sacred relationship with him. Once in that relationship, we become part of (a member of) His body, along with every other believer.

Each of us is a completely unique part of that spiritual body; no two of us is alike, which is just the way God likes it. Our "unity" is about you and me recognizing our common purpose. That common purpose is to live out the plan God has for us as individuals, and as a faith community, to become more like Christ.

So we share this relationship with each other and Christ, and with God. That does not mean that we think the same way about everything. We can share the same faith in Jesus Christ, without agreeing on every issue that ever comes up. We never lose being unique individuals. But when we commit to sharing this faith relationship with each other, we are not just sitting next to strangers on Sunday morning. We are sharing support for each other through conflict, serious illness, loss of a job, death of people we love, and financial pressures.

A month ago Ruth and I celebrated our 45<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We have known each other, and been best friends, since we were 15 years old. During these past 50 years we have discovered that we do NOT; do NOT agree on everything. But we do agree on the things that are fundamental to our relationship. God is at the center of our lives; we are faithful to each other; there is nothing our children can do that will separate us from them. These things are

fundamental to our relationship. [story of folded wash cloths in the shower – not fundamental to our relationship]

The faith you and I have in Jesus Christ puts us in sacred relationship with him and with God the Father. As long as you and I agree on the things that are fundamental to THAT relationship, we should honor each other through the lesser things that we may not agree on. That is what Jesus was teaching his disciples; that is what Paul was teaching the Roman church. That is what God was teaching Israel through their experience of the Passover. Our unity is based on our sacred relationship. Radical unity is a spiritual issue.

When you and I tackle the inevitable misunderstandings in our families, and in our faith family, praying to be guided by the Holy Spirit, Jesus has made a promise that he will be there with us. This lesson is about handling the trials of real life.

Paul saw division and in-fighting as symptoms of believers getting off track, and dishonoring the Spirit of Christ that lives in them. If we combine the teachings today from Jesus and from Paul, we find Scripture guiding us that when quarreling causes division, we need to address it, and not assume the conflict will just go away; people need to talk; if that doesn't work, we need to get outside help (from a few trusted Christians); ask the Holy Spirit for guidance; and ask for the results to bring honor to God.

Jesus was teaching that faith in him carries with it responsibility for action; action that is not easy, and needs to be done carefully. Our families may not have worked this way. Our culture certainly does not work this way, but celebrates individualism and hedonism.

Jesus teaches us to do the hard work of Radical Unity in every aspect of our life; to approach each other and talk things out. He promised to be in the midst of this holy work. Making that effort will bring glory to God. Amen.