

Homily – Collected Into One (Easter)

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Welcome, once again, to our Easter celebration, the highpoint of our liturgical year. With a feast of flowers, joyous music, and “Alleluia” and “Rejoice” banners, we proclaim the great triumph of Christ rising from the dead. The wilderness of Lent is behind us. The tomb is empty and a bright, new day has dawned. “He is Risen! He is Risen, indeed!”

I love the communal joy and celebration of Easter morning services. I love the music, the vestments, the crowds, and the lights. I love the triumphant and public acclamation of Jesus’s historic and miraculous rising. I love how we are connected through time and space with trillions of other people who have celebrated Easter. I love all of these things but most of all I love what God has done for us through the life death and resurrection of Jesus. I am one who believes that Jesus is not a Plan-B for things that got out of control. I think the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have been planned since before the beginning of time. And, I believe, I trust, and I know that the plan worked in removing the barriers that had separated us.

I dream of a world in which we are united again with one other. I can imagine a world in which we look with affection at our differences. I believe in a world in which we see God in all and around all. I dream of a world in which we can see how extensive God’s love is for all of creation and for all people.

Now, I am not one of those who sees Jesus as the great divider. Jesus does not make some winners and some losers. Jesus does not bless some and curse others. Jesus does not turn his back on those who struggle, doubt, or even deny the existence of God. I don’t see Jesus as the great divider. That view would go against my view of our Triune God, and my understanding of Jesus. Instead, for me God is the great uniter - the ultimate connector.

We have a God who created all and declared it good.

We have Christ who is throughout the universe as the perfect combination of spirit and matter.

We have a Holy Spirit who connects all things in that universe, and certainly connects all people.

We have a God of unlimited grace and mercy whose very nature is to love us unconditionally.

And, when we look at Jesus as the great connector we see a gate to the kingdom of heaven that is open to all. It is open to all irrespective of whether a person has been good or bad. This is a gate that has qualities of grace and mercy. This is a gate which includes all, welcomes all, and invites all.

Today, I want to invite you to let go of any notion that God divides us, and instead embrace the certainty that we have a God who unites. We are united to God, and we are united to one another. This is a message of hope that is needed as we remember our time of sacrifice for the common good. It is a message of faith that is needed in Eastern Europe, in the Middle East, and in Africa. It is a message of love that is needed by us here today.

Now, when we have Jesus as the gate of union, then we can look around and see that we have been gathered together with people who are very different than we are. We often surround ourselves with people who are already like us, but Jesus calls us to reach out and be in union with the other. Jesus calls us to be connected to our enemies. During his lifetime, Jesus was constantly reaching out and connecting to the people around him, but sometimes we reject being united, especially with people that bring out the worst in us, or we bring out the worst in them.

In his book “The Great Divorce” C.S. Lewis tells the story of a bus load of people who travel from hell to heaven. And, some of the people who had the blessing of traveling to heaven get back on the bus and go back to hell because they saw people in heaven that they didn’t want to be around. Resentment and trauma can lead a person away from God because we can’t stand that God would be connected to someone who hurt us. We reject unity with God and others because our wounds hurt so much.

Is it any wonder why Jesus taught so much about forgiveness and healing? Our false self and wounded ego cause us to reject unity with God and others and move back toward separation and division. Sometimes we prefer a Jesus who picks us and not them. What part of your own history causes you to prefer division? Who are the voices in your own life that lead to separation? Can you silence those voices? Can you turn off that noise so that you can focus on unity? After all, it’s a waste of God’s time—and our own—to try to prove who is more worthy, more holy, more blameless. Stop trying to be better than someone else. All that does is make us egocentric. I truly think Christianity itself will not be reformed until its basic proclamation to the world is that we bear the kingdom of heaven as a collective. Paul called this collective mystery “the Body of Christ.” We’ve got to include all and exclude no one. That’s why our central sacrament is Communion, a shared meal and a shared table. And, this is why, here at St. Barnabas, we say that all are welcomed to share in the bread and

wine, no matter where you are in your spiritual journey. More important than being correct or proper is being in communion, collected into one.

One of the things I appreciate about our Church is that we stay at table with one another. Let me explain. St. Barnabas is part of the Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Church is part of the eighty-million person Anglican Communion. We are the third largest Christian denomination in the world. Fifteen years ago, it looked like the Anglican Communion was going to splinter because of issues over gender and sexuality. More specifically, the election of a gay partnered bishop here in the U.S. made the conservative Anglican bishops in Africa quite grumpy. However, throughout all of that animosity, we were able to stay at the communion table with one another. We stayed in union even when we were unaligned, and over a few short years this issue became less divisive. There is beauty in staying in communion with one another. Today I want to conclude with a story that will help us in our union as we are collected into one by Jesus.

“Old Turtle and the Broken Truth,” is a wonderful children’s book that our grandson, Carter, will receive in the mail on Tuesday. This book tells a story of how the world came to be so fragmented when it is meant to be whole, and how we might put it back together again. One night, in a far-away land that is somehow not so far away, a truth falls from the stars. As it falls, it breaks into two pieces, one piece blazes off through the sky and the other falls straight to the ground. One day, a man stumbles upon the gravity-drawn truth and finds carved in it the words “You are loved.” It makes him feel good, so he keeps it and shares it with the people in his tribe. The thing sparkles and makes the people who have it feel warm and happy. “You are loved.” It becomes their most prized possession, and they call it The Truth. Those who have The Truth grow afraid of those who don’t have it, who are different. And those who don’t have it covet it. Soon people are fighting wars over the small piece of truth, trying to capture it for themselves. A little girl who is troubled by the growing violence, greed, and destruction in her once-peaceful world goes on a journey to speak with Old Turtle, the wise counselor. Old Turtle tells her that The Truth is broken and missing a piece, a piece that shot off in the night sky so long ago. Together they search for it and, when they find it, the little girl puts the jagged piece in her pocket and returns to her people. She tries to explain, but no one will listen. Finally, a raven flies the broken truth to the top of a tower, where the other piece has been ensconced for safety, and the rejoined pieces shine their full message. “You are loved / and so are they.” And the people begin to comprehend, and the earth begins to heal.

You are loved, and so are they. This is the same message we have from Jesus. Jesus unites us in communion even in our differences. He rose from the dead to show us that nothing can separate any of us from the love of God. He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!