

## On Being/Becoming

Today's choice of the gospel passage from John often seems odd because of our linear sense of time; our expectations of narrative to proceed in one direction from beginning to end. We seem to expect this to hold here; especially in the light of the way the scriptures have been leading us into the story of Jesus' ministry's end and what it accomplished in God's plan of redemption. Last week we commemorated the Ascension of Jesus, next week we will welcome the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, yet our gospel reading from John takes us back into an earlier even; to the night of Jesus' last meal before the crucifixion. This passage is actually a very small section from the farewell address Jesus gives to the disciples that night. This passage resembles in many ways the time in which we are living...it is a type of between time memory. Although we have already looked at the Easter Story including the resurrection and ascension, we have not yet commemorated the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Instead this last Sunday before Pentecost we are revisiting the time Jesus tries to prepare his chosen disciples with final instructions about God's reign and how he expects them to continue before the promised events will unfold. As we consider this small slice of that farewell address it might help if we remember that the meal begins with Jesus washing the feet of his disciples all of them...speaking of being one who came to serve, not to be served and calling upon his disciples to follow this path. As the meal progresses, he gives them that new commandment from which we have derived the name for the remembering that meal...Maundy Thursday...that command they are to love one another as he has loved them. This loving relationship among disciples will be how the world will recognize who they follow. Then Jesus begins praying for the disciples; speaking of the relationships that are between him and the "Father" and how they and all who will believe in the future are now included within that relationship as branches are connected as on a vine. John's imagery is vivid but complex. The concepts are deeply meaningful, and hard to grasp as we look around and observe human behavior. Jesus proclaims those who follow him will be known by their love and that love draws them into a deep and intimate relationship with him and the other aspects of the Godhead known as the Trinity, although the word Trinity never appears. Jesus' prayer is very inclusive: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." John's next statement is one of those convoluted ones which reads beautifully but is hard to digest. "As you, Father are in me and I am in you." With our understanding of Jesus as being fully human and fully divine, this part of the statement seems clear. However the statement doesn't end there but continues: "may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." A little later this is added: That they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." This expectation that somehow we will be one, and that we are also one with the Father and Son seems an impossibility. Looking around our world, even among those all claiming to be Christians, those who follow Christ and the teachings he left for us...oneness is not something that is obvious. The prayer that Jesus offers here is one of intercession; he has stop giving them instructions for the mission they will lead. When he prays that they will be one...that is exactly what he is doing...not preaching, not teaching, not rallying the troops to go out into the word. Here Jesus is praying. And he is praying not only for those with him at that table, but also for all

who would later come to believe. If Jesus' words were exhortations, then we could strive to meet his expectations; we could perceive a mission and work not to disappoint him. Instead here we are eavesdropping on a prayer on our behalf...we are not called here to an action. We can only wonder that at this moment Jesus is in conversation with the Father expressing concern for us. At the center of this prayer is expressed this amazing concept that relationship between the first and second members of the Trinity share desires to draw everyone into that relationship. In the gospel of John the "world" is often a way of describing those who oppose Jesus and his teachings. Nonetheless, it was for love of the world that God sent the Son into that world. In this prayer which comes at the end of his ministry, Jesus intercedes not only for those "given to him" but also for that world. Jesus prays that the unity of those who believe will allow others to believe. In the Greek, the word translated as believe could just as easily be translated as trust...Those who trust in the message he has brought will be able to live into the relationship Jesus asks they have with one another. Believing in Jesus and in God is presented in John not as an intellectual exercise but as being in a trusting relationship of love with someone who embodies God's love for the world and who calls us friend...loving us. This is probably why the lectionary has brought us back to that night...the focus on oneness...with God and each other...Because in this prayer, the distance between the passages from scripture, the stories they tell and our own stories no longer exists. Suddenly what was going on at that table with those disciples is in the here and now as Jesus prays for us. Suddenly Jesus is praying for us. In that time Jesus was about to go into the Garden of Gethsemane which is why it forms part of the Holy Week readings. But as we hear this passage today those events are in the past, even our celebration of those things is several weeks in the past. And since that Maundy Thursday meal we have gone with them to the cross, prayed as Jesus gave his life for us and stood outside the empty tomb with Mary. We have celebrated both the Resurrection and the Ascension. We know Jesus was victorious over the grave and now has been raised to sit at the right hand of God. But his disciples, including us, are trying to make sense of all of this. So in this new time, this in-between time as we await Pentecost, we go back and hear Jesus' prayer. It is a prayer that looks to the future, not only of those he had gathered but to the welfare of those who would be gathered in our time and all the time before and after us. This prayer is one that focuses on unity, on all being one. It is likely that oneness was not evident among them as it is not evident among us. Judas was there with his plotting, James and John were probably still jockeying for promotion, and Peter was petulant. We resemble them more than we would like. As we return to Jesus' prayer we can understand that it contains his hope, his vision, and his image of what we, his followers are to look like and how we are to live our lives together in community. His words are clearly for everyone...then and now. It is most definitely a prayer for community...for his followers to be a part of a greater whole. According to Jesus all are to be connected...there are no provisions for solitary Christians or spiritual "Lone Rangers." We often give up on the concept of unity confusing it with uniformity...as we sort ourselves into groups where all are alike. We are actually one in Christ whether we like it, or each other, or not. Whether we agree or disagree we are called to love and care for each other. To become a part of Christ is to become a part of his community, a part of the one. Jesus' prayer reminds us that our unity, our "oneness" is to be a sign to the world of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Oneness and unity is about love. We are part of Christ's family because we have been claimed. All families have differences among the members, but are still connected. We are human so

our love and our connections are often strained and stretched, but we are reminded here that we are connected through Christ...all of us. As Jesus feed, tends, bears witness to and breaks barriers for love, Jesus' own are called to do the same in love. The gospel explains how this love is possible. It is a behavior-shaping attitude toward the world, which is both a gift we cannot manufacture and a choice to live into the promises of that gift that is already given. We cannot paste it onto ourselves. Like branches of that vine Jesus described in his last address, we live in something larger than ourselves in which we are nurtured to bear fruit by the Spirit dwelling in us. But because we are more than vines, we also become more loving by choosing to follow Jesus' model and teachings about what love is: tending, feeding, bearing witness and breaking barriers for love...all those things which inhibit our becoming more loving. The mystery of the incarnation is that God desired this unity with us so much God became one of us. And in that moment we were drawn into the oneness of God, Creator, Son and Spirit. It is only with God's help that we can live into that oneness; seeking to love as we are loved by God. Our times are called the between times as we live in the time between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ. We can rejoice in the assurance that Christ is still with us, still continuing to pray for our oneness, our unity. Jesus' prayer ends "so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them." So we are already one in Christ through grace, but still working on that love which brings about the oneness Christ envisions among ourselves. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.