

Seventh Sunday of Easter  
Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26

## One and Many<sup>\*</sup>

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Last Sunday night, I attended the Rites of Spring choir benefit here at Transfiguration. It was a wonderful event: great music, delicious food, and delightful fellowship. After the event, I left the church and walked home. As usual, I headed down Fifth Avenue. But as I approached Madison Square Park, it was clear that something was wrong. The traffic on Fifth Avenue had come to a halt. There were flashing lights everywhere, and lots of people were standing around.

As I walked by 26th Street and Broadway, I saw a fire truck and fire fighters spraying water into the back of the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Sava. There were even more fire fighters on 25th Street. But it wasn't until I got home, however, that I learned about the full extent of the damage. The fire had completely gutted the cathedral, and virtually nothing remained but the stone walls.

It turns out that the parish community had just celebrated their Easter Sunday earlier in the day. A caretaker had extinguished hundreds of candles while the parish was having its luncheon. Unfortunately, the caretaker put a still-smoldering candle in a cardboard box and stored it behind some wooden furniture. By the time the fire was discovered at 7 pm, it was too late.

The historical connections between the Cathedral of St. Sava and the Episcopal Church are deep. Their building was originally dedicated in 1855 as a chapel of Trinity Church Wall Street for Episcopalians who had moved uptown. The first public celebration of an Eastern Orthodox service in North America occurred in 1865 in that same building. And in 1943, the building was sold to the Serbian Orthodox community.

A week after the fire, I remain stunned by the loss. I pass by the vicinity of the cathedral almost every day, walking between my home and my office or Transfiguration. As a member of this wonderful community, I can't but help wonder what it would feel like if our own beloved church burned down. What would we feel in terms of loss? And not just the physical loss, but also the emotional and spiritual loss.

As a priest, I also wonder what the clergy and staff of St. Sava's must be experiencing. In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about the jailkeeper who experienced enormous distress after a violent earthquake threw open the doors of the prison in which Paul and Silas were being held. In fact, the jailkeeper was so

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upset at the possibility that his prisoners had escaped that he drew his sword and was about to kill himself. It must have seemed to him that, as a result of that disaster, the world had come to an end.

It's fitting that today's Gospel reading is taken from Jesus' prayer for unity at the end of the Last Supper. Jesus prays that his disciples and followers "may be one." I don't know if you caught this, but you and I are literally mentioned in this prayer. Jesus prays not only for those who were present at the Last Supper, but for all those in the future who "will believe" in him. That's us! His final prayer before his betrayal and arrest is that we all be one, just as he is one with the Father.

Of course, Jesus' farewell discourse was not just written for the Church of the Transfiguration or even Episcopalians. It's a prayer for the unity of all Christians. Ironically, it may seem that the history of Christianity is basically the story of disunity and schism.

Some of you may know that, prior to coming to Transfiguration, I was a seminary professor at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One of the classes that I taught was early church history. The class content started around the year 50 C.E. with the Council of Jerusalem, and it ended in the year 1054, when the Western church split from the Eastern church.

It's been nearly a thousand years since this Great Schism, when East and West mutually excommunicated each other. There are, of course, many differences between Eastern and Western Christianity. They use the Julian calendar; we use the Gregorian calendar. Their liturgical tradition is rooted in Greek; ours is rooted in Latin. They use leavened bread for communion; we use unleavened wafers. They have patriarchs; we have popes and archbishops.

But the main reason for the Great Schism was a dispute over just three words in the Nicene Creed. Look for those words today as you sing the creed after the sermon. In the section about the Holy Spirit, we say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son." It is these three words – "and the Son" (which is "filioque" in the Latin) – that resulted in the thousand-year rift between East and West.

For the Eastern church, saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father *and the Son* meant that the Holy Spirit was subordinated to Jesus Christ. In other words, it's OK to say that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father, since Jesus was also begotten by the Father. But to say that the Holy Spirit proceeded from *both* the Father and the Son would mean that the Holy Spirit was subordinated, or less important, than the other two persons of the Trinity.

Stepping back a bit, it's ironic that all this talk of "Fathers" and "Sons" in the Creed and in the Gospel is occurring on Mother's Day. (Happy Mother's Day, by the way, to all of you who are mothers or who have played a mothering role to others. Thank you for your many sacrifices and for all that you have done.) Mother's Day is an

important reminder of the subordination of not just the Holy Spirit in the history of Christianity, but also of women. There is an entire tradition of desert mothers, female mystics, prophetesses, and abbesses that exists in Church History, and it is critical that we honor that tradition as well.

So how do we make sense of Jesus' prayer in the Gospel that we all be one? How can we talk about unity when there has been such disunity in the history of Christianity? East and West split in 1054. The Church of England split from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534. And today there are something like 41,000 Christian denominations!

For me, oneness is not about lockstep thinking or action. Rather, the oneness that Jesus talks about during the Last Supper is about unity in diversity. Jesus calls us to be one in the same way that he and the Father are one. That is, in the same way that the Trinity is both one and three, we are also called to be both one and many. Even though the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of one substance, they are also separate persons. The bottom line is that it's important for all Christians to be united in the Body of Christ, but also to honor our theological, liturgical, and ecclesial differences.

This morning, a week after the fire, the congregation of St. Sava will go on with their Sunday services. In fact, the historic connection between the Episcopal Church and Eastern Orthodoxy continues. Calvary and St. George's Episcopal Church on Park Avenue has opened its doors to the Serbian Orthodox community until they can find a permanent home. As one of my friends posted on Facebook, this is a small but important step towards healing the divisions between East and West.

The distraught jailer in the Acts of the Apostles ended up hearing the Good News and was baptized by Paul and Silas. Perhaps there are also seeds of hope here, in which new life can spring out of trauma and disaster. Indeed, the stone cross on top of the back wall of St. Sava's cathedral still remains standing above the charred remains of the building.

Unity in diversity. As we await the imminent coming of Pentecost and the birthday of the church next week, I invite us to reflect on Jesus' prayer that we "may all be one," just as he and the Father are one. May the divine love of the Trinitarian Godhead – in both its oneness and plurality – be reflected in our own relationships at Transfiguration and in the world.