

**May 29, 2022
Christ the Servant, Reston
Easter 7
John 17:20-26**

Today's gospel is taken from the 17th chapter of John in what is known as Jesus' "high priestly prayer" in which he prayed that "they all might be one." He said, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

So, here we are two millennia later and the church does not appear to be one as Jesus prayed it might be. In the first thousand years it split into an Eastern Church and a Western Church. Then the Western Church split into Catholic and Protestant. Then the Protestants split into 217 Christian denomination in the United States and Canada alone. On top of that, the old mainline denominations are dwindling. Lutheranism has declined ... along with other denominations with which we are in full communion: the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, and the Episcopalians. That may look like bad news until we consider that Christianity *worldwide* is on the increase and that diverse denominations may be the Holy Spirit's way of reaching diverse peoples.

Jesus did two things before he ascended into heaven to insure a 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church' as our Nicene Creed puts it. First, he appointed Peter the first apostle – the rock – upon which the entire church would be built. Second, he assured his followers that, after he ascended, the Holy Spirit would arrive to complete the work he began. And so, soon after Jesus disappeared out of sight into the heavens, the Holy Spirit appeared into sight from the heavens – dropping like tongues of fire. Peter began his task of preaching and building the church. Before he died he

appointed other apostles to carry on this work. Before they died they appointed others ... and so forth and so on down through the centuries.

We exist as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” church because of the Holy Spirit. But, as N.T. Wright has pointed out, “The church is never more than one generation away from extinction.” That means that, for all these generations, the church has passed down the good news that we are saved by God’s grace through faith in the cross of Jesus Christ. It is only when we stop proclaiming the good news that the church is dead. If any generation stops proclaiming that, the church is dead. This is our responsibility as a church and as a congregation. And this is where we rely on the help of the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us. And here is where we need to trust the Holy Spirit, especially as a congregation.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willamon have identified two types of congregations which have died or which will die because they do not trust the Holy Spirit to guide and direct. The first is the “fast asleep” congregation which sees the church only as a spiritual entity, keeping itself far above the world which is seen as corrupt and sinful. The fast asleep church is content to worship and pray. People in a fast-asleep church come to “get away” from the culture they feel helpless to change. God will make things perfect in heaven, so let’s just go to church and wait for that. The sanctuary becomes a waiting room for heaven.

The other type of church which will die is the “frenetic church” which is so frightened of decline that it furiously puts all kinds of programs in place and does its best to make things comfortable and nice for people so that the attendance figures go up. That sounds good, but it really is trying to do the work the Holy Spirit does because it doesn’t trust in the Holy Spirit to do it. So, they apply marketing strategies which, they reason, can “sell church” like cars are sold. These are the churches which

put Starbucks in their lobbies and use attendance figures to measure the success of the Holy Spirit. Really?!

Where are we as a congregation? Well, we certainly are not a “fast asleep church.” We jump right into societal problems and are into afraid to address sensitive issues. Our sanctuary is not a place where folks come to wait for heaven. And we’re not a frenetic church. The closest thing we have to a Starbucks in our lobby is a box of Joe from Dunkin occasionally. But, like almost every single other congregation in our own Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which can look back to higher attendance numbers in the past, I think maybe we are tempted to hedge our bets with the Holy Spirit. We think, “If we don’t do this, we won’t survive. I’ve we don’t do that we won’t survive.”

Don’t misunderstand. I think CTS needs to prudently plan for its own future. I think we always need to keep an eye on finances, membership, and attendance. But I do think the very first question we need to be asking ourselves is, “What is the Holy Spirit calling us to do? Do we exist for institutional survival, or do we exist to pass along to the good news about the grace God has given through the cross of Jesus Christ? Do we trust in the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us? That would be a good way to pray.

I have been so proud of the way this congregation has answered the Holy Spirit’s call. I brag about you to others. Just as Jesus, in this High Priestly Prayer, is getting in his last word before he leaves, I get to give advice and encouragement before I leave. My advice is to keep doing the things which have made us strong, celebrating worship, thinking through critical issues, and serving. Always remember, it’s pronounced “serving,” not “surviving.” I am confident that the Holy Spirit has good things in store for Christ the Servant.

Let's come next Sunday, Pentecost, and celebrate that God has lit a fire under us which has never gone out. And then let's come the Sunday after, Trinity Sunday, to be reminded that we, indeed, are "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." Then let's keep coming Sunday after Sunday embracing our mission and the power God has given us to meet it.