



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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When Getting Along Is Hard

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 17, 2015
The Seventh Sunday of Easter: Based on John 17:6-19*

This week the religious world, at least in the US, is all a flitter about the latest Pew poll about the drop in the number of those who identify as Christians. One headline read: *Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow*. The percentage of Christians did indeed drop from 78.4% to 70.6%. While that decrease is not insignificant, America remains hugely Christian. Reading more deeply into the findings, the results are not a surprise: continued decline of mainline denominations, growth of the number of those who identify as having no religious affiliation particularly among millennials, a significant increase in the number responding as atheists or agnostics, and a fairly significant increase in the number of those of other faiths, particularly Hindus and Muslims. Some of the subsequent reactions are filled with xenophobia about the last category, particularly the increase in those identifying as Muslims. Such attitudes reflect a fear that must be addressed by all people of faith at every opportunity to refute the notion that all Muslims are extremists. Such thinking is as absurd as claiming that all Christians are fundamentalists or liberals or any of the other innumerable categories into which over 200 million American Christians arrange ourselves.

"Holy Father," Jesus prayed, "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." In the final days of his life, Jesus, according to the gospel of John, earnestly prayed that those who would come to identify as his followers would experience a great oneness of spirit and purpose. It does not require an advanced degree in theology to realize that this prayer of Jesus has not exactly come to full fruition. To that, there are a couple of possible reactions. One is to do what numbers of our former members apparently have done: give up on all of it by becoming unaffiliated. I truly believe that one reason the mainline church loses so many members is the utter lack of unity in the church and beyond that the despicable way we treat each other. I admit to feeling so estranged from many right-wing Christians as to resent their using a name I cherish. I am not proud of it, but it's true: if **their** position is Christian, I want to be something else. The divisions within Christianity are so deep that I sometimes believe that many on each side find greater joy and purpose in opposing the other side than they/we do in seeking to follow Jesus. It's not attractive; and it is not surprising that some take a look at this kind of behavior and ask, "Who needs this?"

While understandable, such thinking is also rather naïve. Christianity began and continues as an experiment. Jesus certainly had no illusion that the idea of a beloved community, characterized by unity, would be an easy sell or an accomplishment that could be reached and maintained as a static reality. Christianity is always about a journey of thoroughly human beings in search of God, and authentic journeys inevitably include the reality of conflict. Jesus was not suggesting that to have unity in the church means that we are always nice. That is hard for me to accept, having been taught all my life that being nice is really important and frankly preferring it to being unpleasant. But finally I have come to understand and accept that always being nice inevitably also means being dishonest. And that leads to trouble. When honesty about conflicts is not acknowledged, feelings get suppressed; and when what we say with our mouths has no connection to what we really mean, the result is a form of craziness and dysfunction that is far from genuine unity. Not only Southerners know about this; many of us in our families of origin learned not to be truthful for the sake of peace. That is not the kind of unity of which Jesus is speaking.

But it is not easy; and we particularly do not like it in the church. And, yet, legitimate differences divide us. On Friday when the sentencing for the Boston bomber was handed down, my heart sunk. I was overcome with a rush of emotions: anger that my country, the most Christian nation in the world, continues to sanction official killing as punishment; sadness at what I believe is a festering blight, an open and terrible sore upon the soul of my beloved

country, a pathology for violence that eats at us in ways we hardly recognize; dissonance because I know that my belief, and particularly the strength of it, puts me at odds with many people within my own religion and some number in this very room; and frankly fear that I may be becoming somewhat obsessed with the issue of capital punishment and could become a little whacky about it. It seems so patently wrong, not just or primarily for the imprecision of convictions, no doubt not an issue in this case, or because of the lack of parity in its administration, also probably not an issue in this case—I expect that a blond, blue-eyed bomber with the last name of Smith would have gotten the same sentence, but simply because choosing to end the life of another person as punishment is for me an abomination before God. And it troubles me that there is not Christian unity in this case.

I am not sure how to live with that and fear that my fervent desire not to deeply offend those who disagree with me exists less in my desire for Christian unity or as a nod to the possibility that I am wrong than in my incessant need to be nice and to avoid unpleasant conflict. It is a dilemma, and Jesus never said it would be easy. I *think* that Christian unity means being able to openly acknowledge conflict, the kind that comes when two good people following his/her own conscience comes to different conclusions—and not only to acknowledge it but to without denigrating the character of the other to find some way to live with together even if no agreement can be reached. I would be dishonest if I did not say that I desperately hope and pray that the 70.6% Christian majority in this country will become of one mind in opposition to capital punishment someday and that the practice will be abolished, but the command to live in some sort of uncomfortable unity with one another cannot depend upon the prevailing of my position. Separating is not the answer; living alongside one another as kindly and lovingly as possible is.

But it has never been easy in the church. The story from Acts this morning is an almost humorous, very human telling of how the replacement for the 12th disciple came to be chosen after Judas's betrayal. Two good men, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. No doubt each man had his own supporters, certainly with strong feelings. Although the community prayed about which to choose, in the end they cast lots, which is to say they flipped a coin. One might say, "so much for the Holy Spirit;" another might say, "the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways." I say, "Oy vey."

In the end, my beloved friends, what we have is God. I know that doesn't make everything clear, and, on occasion, faithless ones I suppose, I am not even sure that it is enough; but I keep hoping, and I keep coming back. And so do you. For me, it is this Eucharistic table that draws me again and again. I don't think there is a blasted thing about it that is magic though I confess to sometimes wishing that there were. The reason it matters so much to me is that it levels all of us, brings us to one common search—the desire to find God. Somehow when we line up here week after week coming to a table that we sometimes suspect of being more superstitious than real, more rote than meaningful, somehow when we do it anyway, we give ourselves over, each of us equal and in need of what only God can give; and in so doing we are as close to being one as we ever are or can be and as near to the transforming power of the love of God as we can get.

It is not perfect unity but it means all the world to me.

In the name of God: *Amen*.