

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Easter 7B) – May 17, 2015
Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Jesus' Prayer of Sanctification...“that they may be one, as we are one”

If you read the gospel of John straight through, things slow down considerably around chapter fourteen and continue that way over the next four chapters. The scene is the Last Supper, and this gospel text is part of what we call Jesus' "farewell discourse" and "high priestly prayer." Jesus prays that his disciples, and all of us, "be one" as he and his heavenly Father are one; and that his disciples and all of us be "*sanctified* in truth,"—"sanctified"—what Scripture calls the second step of the journey of faith. Becoming one with God, according to Scripture involves two steps—one step is done *for us*, and the second step is what happens *in us* in our lifelong journey of faith. Now, few of us feel we've ever gone past the first "step," as we realize that our faith journeys are one-step-forward, one-step-backward affairs. But it is important to look at these two steps as the Bible describes them, for the sake of a little encouragement.

The first "step" is what the Bible calls "justification." Frederick Buechner points out that in printer's language, "to justify" means to format the type in such a way that all full lines are of equal length and are flush both left and right—in other words, to put the printed lines in the *right relationship* with the page they're printed on and with each other. The Biblical sense of this word "justify" is very close to this meaning. Being justified means being brought into right relation. St. Paul stated simply that being justified means having "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand."ⁱ He uses this word "justification" for the first "step" as it were, of salvation, or as the church would call "atonement." The emphasis on atonement to describe salvation led the church in creating some of the most God-awful treatises and doctrines that were either so difficult to understand and/or which presented God as a blood-thirsty tyrant who had to have satisfaction paid to him for the sin of humanity, in the form of the atoning sacrificial death of his own son Jesus. All that led Martin Luther to describe the experience of trying to understand and then digest these treatises and doctrines as akin to drinking the pure milk of the gospel through a sack of coal! Fourteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich, cut through all that when she wrote,

"What wouldst thou know thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was his meaning. Who sheweth it thee? Love. Wherefore sheweth he it [to] thee? For Love. Hold thee therein... Thus was I learned that Love is our Lord's meaning. And I saw full surely in this, and in all, that before God made us, he loved us. Which love was never slacked, nor ever shall be. And in this love he hath done all his works. And in this love he hath made all things profitable to us. And in this love our life is everlasting... And all this shall we see in God without end."ⁱⁱ

So, salvation—atonement—in the Bible it comes in two parts, and the first is "justification." God in Creation and then in Redemption has established, and then reestablished that we are all one already, in ourselves, in one another, in God. Buechner put it this way:

“There’s nothing you have to do or be. It’s on the house. It goes with the territory. God has ‘justified you,’ lined you up, [reconnected you to the image and likeness of God with which you were made]. To feel this somehow in your bones is the first step on the way to being saved.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Or as Paul stated in the letter to Titus (3:4-7)—and Peter said in Acts (15:11): we are justified by *grace*. God in Christ has “justified you,” lined you up in right relationship, in one-ness. Atonement is “at-one-ment.”^{iv}

Now, what Jesus accomplished *once for all*—at-one-ment—through his life and death; as the Risen and Ascended One, he continues to work to accomplish *continually in all*. This second part of salvation or atonement is what the Bible calls “sanctification” or “consecration.” Isn’t there something in our lives that goes beyond the recognition that God loves each of us and wants us on God’s side, and that we are all one, and that Christ died once for all, justifying us by grace? Isn’t there something in our lives that goes beyond the realization that our selfishness and fear will not have the final word? Isn’t there something in our lives that goes beyond being forgiven and loved and healed and saved?^v

A bit like the story of the “Beauty and the Beast.” —as Buechner points out: “it is only when the Beast discovers that Beauty really loves him in all his ugliness, that he himself becomes beautiful.”^{vi} It is only when we discover that our ugliness and fear, our ignorance and selfishness, and even our mortality, do not have the last word because of what Jesus accomplished once for all, for us, for me, for you—it is only when we discover that what was done once *for all*, *for us*, is what God is working to do *in each* and *in all* of us through the Spirit of Jesus Christ—in other words, it is only when we discover that God really loves us now in all our unlovableness that we become God-like and loving. This gradual transformation of the Beast back into Beauty is a long and difficult one, usually lasting a lifetime. That is because with part of ourselves, we sinners prefer our sin—our distorted capacity—because it’s what we know; it’s what we are used to—“just as with part of himself, the Beast prefers his glistening snout and curved tusks,” as Buechner put it.^{vii}

But little by little—we start becoming by faith what we already are through grace—one in ourselves, one in one another and God. The forgiven person starts to become a forgiving person, the healed person starts to become a healing person, the loved person starts to become a loving person—the saved person starts to become a saving person, as it were—and the victims of injustice start to become agents of God’s justice.^{viii} That’s sanctification. That also reminds me of another beautiful prayer for sanctification in our tradition, from St. Francis. His prayer has us realize that the sanctified life is not just a life of loving, hoping and joy; but rather it is loving *in and through* the context of hatred, hoping *in and through* the context of despair, and living a life of joy even where there is sadness, and so on. Francis’ prayer:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is

sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen*^x

So, Christ *for us*, once for all, starts to become Christ *in us* continually. What was finished or fulfilled once for all, then, is paradoxically the work we join in with Christ^x in his task of sanctification, in participating in the repair, restoration and renewal of a just world in loving relationship with God; as Jesus prayed, “that they may be one, as we are one.”

ⁱ Romans 5:1-2; see also Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking (London: Collins, 1973), p. 48f.

ⁱⁱ Julian of Norwich (James Walsh, S.J. translator) The Revelations of Divine Love (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke Books, 1961), Ch. 86.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, *Ibid.*, p. 49.

^{iv} As one observer put it,

“As far back as the Pythagoreans—500 B.C.E.—‘One’ was thought of not as a numeral but as a philosophical idea: as the unity from which all things arise...Very early on, ‘One’ became an image for divine unity...The sacred One has been named variously Tao or the Great Monad (in China), The Single One (by the Mayans), Brahman (in Hinduism), God (in Christianity), The Most High (in Judaism), The One God (in Islam). The aim of the mystic is to become one with this divine whole [and the purpose of God is interpreted as being in union and communion—being one with us]...In materialistic cultures of today, ‘One’ suggests the individual, the first, the most powerful or successful or richest or most beautiful, the winner [as in the popular mantra, ‘we’re Number 1!'] Psychologically, the experience of oneness is a natural state before the child becomes aware that he or she is an individual. Feelings and fantasies may appear at first as belonging to other people...as much as to oneself. Such experiences of fusion are lost with increasing age and awareness, with the necessity to develop a clear sense of self and individuality [totalitarian states and coercive or exclusivist religions nonetheless try to suppress this]. Yet the sense of the deeper connectedness of all things, that ‘the multiplicity of the empirical world rests on an underlying unity,’ can return in maturity when it may be sensed that male and female, spirit and body, inner and outer, consciousness and the unconscious, the individual and others, the I and the Thou, are One.” (Quoted in “One” in The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 710).

^v Becoming one with God and one with our true undistorted, [unrefracted] selves and with each other—that was and still is God’s purpose, Jesus’ mission, as Jesus himself said in his prayer just before his arrest: “that they may all be one; as you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” (John 17:21). And yet, although that happened on a cosmic and ontological scale by Jesus *for us*—in other words, affecting our universe and our very being—we have not lived into that reality accomplished once for all long ago. It needs to happen *in us* as well.

^{vi} Buechner, *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86

^{vii} Many people drop out during their lifetime with the transformation of Christ-for-all to the Christ-in-all hardly more than begun, and among those who stay with it there are few, if any, who don’t drag their feet most of the way (Buechner, *Ibid.*)

^{viii} Buechner, *Ibid.*

^{ix} Quoted in The Book of Common Prayer, (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1977), p. 833.

^x ...in his ongoing mission of repairing the world so that what happened through his cross once *for all* will become God all *in all*. We as followers of Christ are a people of the Covenant—an eternal relationship. Jesus in his life, death, and resurrected life continues the ongoing mission to restore God's eternal Covenant by working to *internalize* it in every human heart and *universalize* it until God is "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23). In this ongoing mission, the Spirit of the Risen Christ calls forward in every generation a *people of God* who can act together with Christ to fulfill God's saving Covenant with all. And God does much of it—with us—as we are empowered by God to join Christ in his ongoing mission.