

7 Easter, Year B

I want to spend most of my time on the passage in our Gospel Reading this morning, but I can't pass up the chance to say something about the reading we heard from The Acts of the Apostles.

This is especially for the members of our Search Committee and Vestry, because the eleven disciples who were left after Judas was no longer part of the group were dealing with the first church vacancy.

They were the first search committee.

And don't you love the way they went about their job of finding a replacement for Judas?

There was no Congregational Assessment Tool survey, no Town Hall gatherings, there was no parish profile, no posting of the vacancy with the Office of Transitional Ministry in New York, and apparently this proto-search committee had a total of one meeting.

They considered two candidates, and to make their selection they cast lots, which means they tossed a handful of stones with different markings on them and then interpreted the arrangement of the stones.

One meeting, two candidates and, bingo, the disciples had their replacement.

Twenty-one months into the vacancy at St. James I think it's safe to say that the search process is a little different in 2015.

Our search committee is meeting every other week.

Its members have produced a parish profile, which is now posted on our website.

They have announced the vacancy and described the position with the Office of Transitional Ministry, and if all goes well they will end up with a sizable pool of well-qualified candidates.

But for all of the things that have changed with the search process down through the centuries, there is one thing that has remained the same, and it is the most important part of the process.

When the disciples needed to find a replacement for Judas, they said their prayers and then they selected a person they knew to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

The task for our search committee is the same.

Over the next several months the search committee will identify qualified candidates and then present a number of those candidates to the vestry.

The vestry will vote, and a new rector will be called to St. James by-the-Sea.

Throughout this process I urge every member of the search committee, every member of the vestry and every member of this parish community to pray daily for God's guidance and for the gift of the Holy Spirit in discerning who the next rector of St. James will be.

And when that person is called, I beg you to unite yourselves in celebration and in support, and to roll up your sleeves and get involved to work for the advancement of the kingdom through this parish church.

OK, now let's turn our attention to John's Gospel.

The passage we heard this morning is a part of a prayer Jesus offered when he gathered with his disciples one last time before his arrest and crucifixion.

This prayer was an intimate outpouring from Jesus' heart and it was a prayer not only for the disciples, but for all of us, too.

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

That they may be one.

That we may be one.

What are the chances, right?

We hear that prayer and we might think to ourselves, “Are you serious, Jesus? Your followers weren't one while you were still alive and they haven't been ever since.”

It would be easy for us to dismiss this prayer, thinking that Jesus didn't understand human nature, or that he wasn't in touch with reality, or that he was asking for pie in the sky.

But I believe Jesus understood human nature perfectly, and that this prayer was sincere, and that he believed his prayer could be fulfilled.

If that's true, and what he was asking for seems impossible to us, maybe it's we who don't understand.

That we may be one.

I hear those words, and immediately I'm thinking of the bickering that takes place within the church, the divisions that put people in different camps, the game playing and maneuvering to win a position of influence or control, the need to always be right or to have the last word.

I'm not thinking just about St. James when I say this.

This is behavior that infects every congregation.

It's the kind of behavior Paul was addressing when he wrote his letters to the different congregations in their infancy.

And this is what goes on in communities of people who have come together to celebrate the love of God, to worship and to work together to help make the world a better, healthier, happier, more peaceful place to live.

The divisions and rancor that can be observed in faith communities grieve our Lord and sap precious energy that could be used for mission and ministry.

Jesus prayed that we may be one.

Can we come to understand that being one doesn't mean being the same?

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In his letter to the Church in Galatia Paul wrote, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female.”

Gal. 3:27-28

Being one doesn't mean we all have to be the same, but it does mean that we have to take our baptismal vows seriously.

Every time we renew those vows we are asked these questions:

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

To each of those questions we answer, I will, with God's help.

It was love that created us in the image and likeness of God. It was love that took on flesh in the person of Jesus who willingly went to the Cross to save us from ourselves.

It will only be by the same quality of love that we will become one.

Can we learn to love like that?

I believe we can.

We share a common identity as followers of Jesus, we share the same mission and vision, we share the same values, and step-by-step we are all journeying to the Promised Land.

There are a hundred ways in which we are different, and in those differences is the potential for division and discord, but what St. Paul was saying in his Letter to the Galatians, and what Jesus was saying in his prayer to his Father, was that what unites us has the power to trump that potential for division and discord any day.

I want to illustrate that point and end by telling you about an article I recently read in the New York Times Magazine.

The article was written by Reza Aslan, an author whose most recent book is *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*.

In his article Aslan wrote about the attempt to say grace when his extended family gathered at the same table for Christmas dinner.

Those gathered included evangelical Christians, a born-again Christian, a devout Muslim and a militant atheist.

Aslan wrote that they stood around the dining room table for ten minutes arguing about how to thank God for the meal they were about to eat.

The family members didn't understand each other's spiritual language, and it reminded Aslan of an ancient Sufi parable. The story tells of four travelers who were journeying together to a distant land.

One was a Persian, one was a Turk, one was an Arab and one was a Greek.

As they traveled they grew tired and hungry, and they began to argue about what they should buy to eat with the single coin they held in common.

The Persian wanted to buy *angur*, the Turk thought they should buy *uzum*, the Arab argued for *inab*, and the Greek wanted *stafil*.

The argument grew more heated until a wide passerby stepped into the middle of the group and explained to the travelers that they were all asking for the same thing: grapes.

Jesus prayed that we may be one.

My friends, it's about love.

What unites us far outweighs our differences.

Listen to the prayer of Jesus, and let us love one another as Christ first loved us.