

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, 24 January 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Today our hymns and lessons all enforce the theme of Christian unity, the idea that the Church, the whole collection of people seeking to follow Christ, circles and blankets the globe. The psalm, and the beautiful offertory hymn based on it, proclaim that God is to be seen everywhere in the beauty and order of the natural world. Evidence of God's handiwork is clearly there for everyone to see.

Similarly the church, we Christians are everywhere – we are all connected – and we are called to work together, with God.

We see this most explicitly in the well known reading from I Corinthians. Saint Paul lays out an image of the church as the Body of Christ which has been used effectively for 2000 years. He says that some of us are eyes, some ears, some noses. We are not all the same, but we are all necessary to the whole. Last week we heard about the variety of gifts that are distributed among us for the benefit of the whole – and this is much the same idea.

We are all united, at least we are meant to be all united – but we are not all the same. And insofar as we ignore or reject any of our gifts, any of our members, we will necessarily be incomplete – and we will be incapable of being what we need to be.

Our Gradual Hymn, “In Christ there is no East or West” was written just over 100 years ago in the early years of the ecumenical movement. It is dear to the hearts of many of us who have spent our lives working with Christians of other traditions to affirm our unity in Christ and to make it real in the world.

This does not mean that we have to agree; it does not mean that we have to look or speak alike. It does mean that we have to stop hurting one another, blaming one another, rejecting one another.

When the Tigard Pastor's group meets each Thursday morning, we know that we do not agree on many theological questions, that our liturgies and governance are very different – but we know that we share a relationship with God in Christ and a commitment to serve the world in his name. So we talk and pray together; we support one another and learn from one another. We are one, but we are not alike.

Why do we care about being one? Is it not good enough simply to be the best Episcopalians we can be, the best Saint James Tigard we can be? While we certainly want to do that, it is not enough. We care about oneness, about unity with other Christian individuals and

groups, because God cares. We all remember Jesus' prayer that 'they all may be one' and so we know we have to try to live it out. Saint Paul makes it clear throughout his Epistles that the earliest church had great struggles with disunity and partisanship. Being one was something they strove toward, but did not necessarily attain with any frequency.

Unity is also important because we cannot do our work without it. Using Paul's body image, imagine trying to walk with no legs, to see with no eyes, to speak with no mouth. As individuals, we sometimes have to function without some of our basic parts and we find ways to do that remarkably well. That has been the history of the Church as well. No one would claim that because the church has yet to achieve full unity, to embrace and properly employ all its members, it has never accomplished anything.

Much has been accomplished – but there is much left to do, and it is best done together, not fragmented.

Think of the situation in Haiti. It has been discouraging to hear all of the complaints and fault-finding, as so many people watch from the sidelines, criticizing the lack of efficiency, the slowness of the response, the appropriateness of specific responses. Some people have very clear ideas about who is responsible, that the whole world response needs to be the responsibility of one agency, or one country, or one group.

The fact is that the people and land of Haiti cannot be properly ministered to unless everyone works together. The experienced emergency response people all know this. The first thing they set up is communication and organization. That is the only way to get food, water, medical care, and shelter to all of the people in need. Insofar as people do not cooperate, they are inefficient and people are left without help. Each group and individual brings different skills, experience, and materials. Cooperation and mutual appreciation are essential to maximize the benefits.

One example of failing to understand this necessity occurred midweek. You probably heard outraged people talking about the inappropriateness, the insensitivity of the Royal Caribbean Cruise Line and its passengers. People were appalled that the cruise ships were continuing to make their scheduled stops in Haiti. Fortunately the head of the Line was not put off by the criticism, but was willing to explain (over and over) what they were doing and why. The critics saw only people celebrating at the scene of a tragedy. Their criticism was a question of propriety.

Mr Goldstein actually investigated the situation, consulted with what is left of the Haitian government and aid organizations. He explained their schedule and their capacities and their ports of call – and asked what they could do to help. As requested, they are continuing to stop at Labadee, their normal Haitian port of call, so that the several hundred workers they employ there will still have their work and income. They also bring in thousands of pounds of supplies every time they come, thus supplementing the supplies coming by other means. All our gifts, all our members – that is what is needed.

As the church we are to act in this way in order to be what we are called to be, and in order to model how human beings ought to behave, in times of disaster or any time.

I was particularly taken by this week's reflection on the Journey with Jesus website. It is a guest column by Sara Miles, someone I have met and for whom I have great respect. Sara titles her remarks "Today is here". She begins, "And so Jesus emerges from his forty days in the wilderness, armed with the power of the Spirit. He walks into his hometown synagogue, among his own people. He opens the scroll, reads the words of the prophet Isaiah, and Jesus' very first word out of the desert is: Today. This is not religion as we know it. Not nostalgia for the past, nor a fantasy of the future. It's not centered in memory or anticipation: next year I'll do this; in the old days we did that, someday God will set things right. Jesus just proclaims, today. Which is exactly what God means whenever she speaks her unspeakable name: I AM. And the power of that name always pulls back the curtain to reveal the eternal present, where God lives."

When we speak of Christian unity, of being Christ's body with all its parts and gifts, we are talking about now, not someday when Christ returns. Now is the time we have, now is when the work we have been given needs to be done.

At another point in her reflection Sara addresses the question of why God needs us to be the body and do the work. Her answer uses the example of having her three-year-old help make dinner. She did not do that because it was the most efficient way to accomplish the task. Dishes were broken; food spilled; everything took longer. She included her daughter so that her daughter could learn. As she says, "It was a way of bringing someone I loved into a sense of herself as a human being sharing in human work, side by side with others. And that's how I think God must look at us, maybe especially at the church. We can't be the most efficient way for God — who, after all, created earth and sky — to get things done. We feel proud of our good deeds, our spilled milk and burned cake, but God is rolling her eyes at the mess we make, cleaning up after us. And patiently showing us how to be human beings, by inviting us to share, with Jesus, in the work that makes us God's children."

God is inviting us, always, to do the work he has given us to do, to love and serve the world in his name, united with everyone else trying to do the same thing.

As Jesus, and Sara, remind us, today is the only day there is. We live in awareness of the past and future, but we live in today or we do not live at all.

We chose the picture for the bulletin cover as an expression of Christian unity. There are all sorts of people together in the procession. The question we must always, every today, ask ourselves is where is our procession going and who is leading it?