

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas  
St. Margaret's Church  
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Easter VII C

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

What does it mean to be one? Does it mean we all look alike or wear the same clothes? Does it mean we function as a team to reach one common goal? Does 'oneness' mean that we all have to believe the same thing? What does 'oneness' look like?

This morning we hear Jesus praying for the disciples in this portion of his 'High Priestly Prayer.' But he also is praying for you and for me, that we will all be one so that all may believe. It sounds to me like a prayer of evangelism. A prayer that we will continue to tell the story. To witness and spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

But I wonder what people who have not heard the story think when they look at the church of today. Do they see unity among believers or do they only see disagreement?

We fight over stupid little things. How we pray. What style of music we sing. Do we stand or kneel? Do we dress up or can we really wear shorts to church? If I am one way or another, can I really be accepted in your church? Who is in and who is out? How should the government's policies support or not support my religious beliefs?

If we are the church and we are caught up in all of these things, then what in the world was Jesus praying for? Where do we experience the 'oneness' Jesus is talking about and what are we going to do so that all may believe?

I must say I have already experienced that 'oneness' in my first three months here at St. Margaret's. The sense of community here is palpable. When babies are born and when people are baptized and when old and young alike die and are commended to eternal life with God, this community comes together. We rejoice and we cry together. We sing and we serve together. We give and we go out into the whole world together.

And yet we are always tempted to be enslaved by our differences. Those differences have the ability to draw us away from the command to love one another and to spread that gospel of love around the world. We do not disagree that we are loved by God and that we are commanded to love our neighbor, but our trivial distractions can often get in the way of proclaiming the Good News. Jesus prays for us to be freed from those diversions so that we may love and serve those in need.

The Good News is that we are not in this challenge as individuals. We are in the ministry together. Jesus did not send the disciples out alone, but together. We are called in build up our community to minister and to share God's love.

St. Margaret's has grown by leaps and bounds from a small country church into what it is today. This community has grown in measurable ways, in our financial status and in the quality of our worship and programs and in the ways in which we reach out to those in need, truly around the world. Outside church consultants would say that we have made it through a fire of sorts, thriving in the midst of rapid growth. But next week we will experience a different type of fire, the fire of the Holy Spirit that descends on the Day of Pentecost.

That fire is not one of destruction or division, but the fire of the Holy Spirit draws us together as one in the Body of Christ. That Spirit unites us as one for the work of ministry.

That Spirit gives us each a diversity of gifts for ministry, gifts we are called to use in this place to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Our rector Mark is going away on sabbatical and vacation in two weeks until the first of September. So what are we going to do during this time that he is away? We could each take a sabbatical of our own. That is certainly an appropriate thing for each of us to do in our own way. To rest. To be renewed for this work. To reflect on our relationship with God. To breathe and to be still.

At the same time, the work in the vineyard remains. We could use this time to reflect on the work ahead of us and to discern a vision for accomplishing that work. That discernment has already begun. With a community that continues to grow, how will our life together need to change to support that growth? This is an exciting question.

How do we communicate with one another? How do we engage and incorporate Newcomers and help them find their gifts for ministry? There are exciting ideas coming out of this work, about which you will hear more over the coming months.

The Newcomers Committee continues to review its work in the past few years and see how we need to improve our ability to welcome visitors. What are people looking for in a church? Are we meeting their needs? Are we always showing our radical hospitality?

How can we continue to pray about the ways in which we reach out to those in need in our community? How do we share our gifts, our love, our compassion, our building with those who are the least of these? How do we continue to stand for justice and peace?

And how do we continue in the apostles teachings? How do we provide formation programs for young and old alike?

It sounds like a lot of work, and indeed it is. It sounds even overwhelming, but together we must bring about God's vision for us. A vision of a church filled with people, filled with love, filled with peace.

You may be saying, who will do this work? How will we do it? That's probably the same question the disciples were asking when they looked at each other after Jesus had ascended. But they stuck together in community, just as we will, to do the work. The Holy Spirit will give us the energy, wisdom, and the guidance to tell us how to do it.

It is not extraordinary work that needs to be accomplished. God has accomplished the extraordinary in Jesus Christ. We are here to do the ordinary work. But it won't be easy. Maybe that's why Jesus knew he needed to pray for us. Because he knew we would hit roadblocks on the journey. He knew we would get caught up in little things that don't amount to a hill of beans.

I believe though, that in our work, we will find that as one preacher put it, "God's unity is found in trusting Jesus. Faith in Jesus requires that we relate to one another as servants, and give ourselves to one another, as Jesus gave himself for us. Being united with Jesus allows each one of us . . . to explore how to be the best individual God has created us to be. This is a harder way toward unity, because it demands of us the very tolerance, forgiveness and love that God gave to us in Jesus. But ultimately it leads both to our being "real" with ourselves, with God, and with each other. We don't have to pretend to be something we are not. We are free to be what God created us to be, [God's] children."<sup>ii</sup>

These are the lessons we have taught our young people, and especially those who experience their Rite 13 ceremony this morning. Margot, Gemma, and Madi, "This is what God declared [to you in your] baptism. In that glorious fountain [you] are washed in God's own cleansing flood. God has been caring for [you], [God's] children, as [you] have been

nurtured in [the word and in the breaking of the bread]. This is what it means to live among God's faithful people, to strive for justice and peace, and to serve all people, following Jesus' example. It means nothing more nor less than living out [your] Baptism."<sup>ii</sup>

"The agape love of God, the love that seeks to give the self away, is the one tie that unites us in Christ Jesus. This is the love that has driven us to teach by example what it means to be a serving community. This is the love that has been the hallmark of authentic Christians since they began as "The Way" in the book of Acts."<sup>iii</sup>

"It will take practice and there will be failings, false starts, and missteps. But [God has] given [each of us and to Margot, Gemma, and Madi] the tools and the foundation for a lifetime's journey. It is a journey that may take [us] many places, perhaps places far away. No matter. If [we] have this love of Christ before [us], behind [us], beside [us], all around [us], then [we] will be united ... in Christ for a lifetime. Where and how [we] journey is up to [us] as [we] follow the Spirit's lead."

I feel the power of the Holy Spirit moving forward in this place and especially among our young people this morning. I hope you do to. This Pentecost is not a time to sit back, but a time to stand up and move forward, to look outside of ourselves, to grow and to be reborn anew as St. Margaret's Church.

We have seen Jesus in this very place, and we have experienced the joy that unity in Christ brings. By being here this morning, we are saying that we will continue to follow. That's all we need along with the Spirit and each other to accomplish infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

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<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*