

Christ's Heart Prayer

7 Easter 2010, May 16, 2010

by Robert Bowler

Last Saturday, at the Diocesan Council meeting, the Bishop spoke from his heart. I could sense a yearning in his voice. He wanted us to understand, not for himself, for the good of his career, or for the sake of his staff at Rock Point, but for the churches in Vermont, for the church itself, for the sake of its 2000-year history, for the sake of its future.

“The Great Emergence” he said “is our current struggle for identity within the church. Who are we as Christians?” he asked. “Every 500 years the church has a rummage sale,” he said. “What do we keep and what do we throw away? We are in the midst of a cataclysmic transformation in history where much of what we have inherited just does not make sense any more. We discover some treasures as we go through all the junk that has accumulated. And it is our use of those treasures that will shape the next 500 years.”

He was referring to the Great Emergence, a dynamic transformation that is shaking the foundations of Christianity right now. 500 years ago, Martin Luther and others inspired the Great Reformation and the rise of Protestantism. 500 years before that was the Great Schism when the Eastern Orthodox Church separated from the Pope in Rome. Every 500 years a new pattern of what it means to be Christian and a church emerges. And we are in the midst of such a momentous event. More than that, we are shaping it here and now as we rethink our vision of Immanuel Church for the future.

As we dig through the dusty past of this congregation, what do we put out for sale on the street corner, and what treasures do we find and raise high as we proceed into the future?

What is our vision of mission and ministry here now? Ask yourself, what inspires you about this place? What brings you here on Sunday morning? What brings you back? What would get you excited about and involved in the life of this congregation?

I read the gospel for today and it shook me to the core. As most of you know, I grew up Episcopalian as a child, but when I felt called to the ministry in my twenties, Unitarian Universalism seemed the perfect fit for me. But after four years of training and ten years serving small UU congregations, there was something that pulled me back to the Episcopal church like iron filings to a magnet. That pull was irresistible. There was something in the life and death of Christ that gripped my very soul.

And here today, we hear his final words to his disciples. He prays to God from the very core of his heart. His words blaze like fire. They transcend time and space. The very heart of God is pouring forth its deepest dreams for life.

He prays for himself first, that His glory as the Son of God be fulfilled as his physical life and ministry reaches its conclusion. Then he prays for his disciples, that they may share in that glory. Finally, he prays for us, for you and for me, for all who hear the word in coming generations that they may also know that same glory.

What is that glorious state for which he prays that all may realize? It is as Jesus repeats:

First in verse 21: “*that they may all* (everyone since that first generation of apostles, all of us) *be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.*”

Then again in verses 22 & 23: *“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”*

Jesus is talking about community at the deepest levels of human existence, “That they all may be one,” all time and space gathered up in Jesus’ heart that is one with God. He prays for all living creatures to know the love that is at the very foundation of the world knit into creation as its lifeblood and ultimate purpose. This is Jesus’ deepest faith, the reason for which he was sent into the world. It is not a doctrine for us to believe, it is a reality now in Christ’s unity with God, a reality for which he is praying in which all may participate, a reality that calls forth faith.

And there is a trillion dollar word here in John’s recording of Jesus’ final prayer. I will not be able to pronounce it for I am not a Greek scholar. It is *tetelaiomenoi*. A large word for a concept that takes us beyond our time in history and is yet a living reality here and now.

The root of the word is *telos* meaning “goal” or “end” or “consummation”. Most translations use the word “perfected” or “made perfect”. It implies a movement toward a goal, a process of reaching for an ultimate end, and that end being complete unity, oneness in God.

Jesus uses a different form of *telos* as his last word on the cross, “It has been consummated” or “It has been brought to the goal.” We know from John’s gospel that Jesus went to the cross as an act of love. His love for the world is perfected, it bears fruit, in the cross and the resurrection, and enables the unity of his followers. We are one as the Body of Christ not because we agree on doctrine, on what we believe. Our unity is in being swept up in the power of love that poured from Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, from his heart in God. The cross is our sign of the ultimate giving of self in love.

I recently came across a quote that has inspired me in the past, but I had forgotten it. It is from George Bernard Shaw: *“This is the true joy of life, the being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”*

Wow! This is what it means to follow Jesus’ Way so that all may be one. Where do you apply your life, steadily, consistently, so that you contribute to the sum total of love and good in the world?

A friend of mine has three sons, ten, eight and four. Of course, there is sibling rivalry and they compete for mom’s attention. So mom introduced a new idea. She has “breakfast meetings” with them, one-on-one time with mom, to “fill their love tanks.” They are making gauges, like gas gauges in a car, to indicate to mom how full their love tanks are. The idea is that this increases their self-esteem, their ability to be loving towards others,

and therefore their confidence to achieve in school and, now that it is spring, on the baseball field, too. She is lighting their torches that will flame bright throughout their lives, in whatever they do.

What if we think of the world, all of creation, as a great “love tank”? Our calling, as carriers of the torch of Christ’s love for the world, is to devote our lives to adding a little bit to that vast love tank. It may seem like we are trying to move the ocean with a teaspoon, but as Jesus said, faith can move mountains and a bright lamp can add light to dark places.

The world may seem empty of love at times. It can seem cruel. People can be selfish, emptying the love from all around. People’s love tanks can simply run on empty. Yet, despite this, we know from Jesus’ prayer in our gospel today, that what is already fulfilled in Christ’s unity with God, is a seed from which sprouted the church, and the church is a sign of hope and action. This is the Great Emergence, an outpouring, through us, of Christ’s profound love for all, that one day, all may be one, as Christ and God are one, that one day all purpose is fulfilled in loving unity within Christ’s vast heart. *Amen.*