

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter

June 1, 2025 Yr C

St. Mary's Barnstable

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John 17:6–19 – "That they may be one, as we are one."

Today is the last Sunday of Easter—next week we'll celebrate Pentecost—but before we move on to tongues of fire and the birth of the Church, we hear Jesus praying.

Not teaching, not preaching, but praying. And he prays for the people he's about to leave behind—his disciples. He says to God, "Protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one."

It's a vulnerable moment. It's intimate. And it tells us something important: that unity was not just a side hope Jesus had for his people. It was core to the mission.

But let's be honest: unity is tough. It's tough in families, in workplaces, in neighborhoods, in countries—and it's tough in churches too. Unity sounds great until we realize it means getting along with people who drive us up a wall. It sounds holy until we're asked to stay in relationship with people we just... don't agree with.

So what do we do with that?

How do we stay in unity with people we can barely stand to talk to?

Let's not dodge the hard part. Some people hold views that feel not just wrong but hurtful—about race, gender, sexuality, politics, or faith. Some people say things that feel like they're chipping away at the very heart of what you believe matters most.

And Jesus still says, "That they may be one." How?

Let's start with this: Unity doesn't mean agreement.

Unity doesn't mean liking everybody.

Unity doesn't even mean compromise all the time.

Christian unity is something deeper. It's about connection. It's about commitment. It's about choosing to belong to each other because we belong to Christ.

We've gotten used to building echo chambers—social, political, even spiritual. And honestly, it's easier. It's easier to be with people who think like us, pray like us, vote like us.

But Jesus didn't just call the people who agreed with him. He called zealots and tax collectors. Fishermen and doubters. Impulsive Peter and doubting Thomas and Judas the betrayer.

And in that ragtag mix of personalities and worldviews, Jesus prays, "Make them one."

That's not sentimental. That's deeply uncomfortable. But it's also deeply holy.

Years ago, I was part of a clergy retreat. We had small groups assigned for daily reflection, and one of the people in my group -- let's call him "Jim" -- was the exact opposite of me in nearly every way.

On the first day, he made a joke that felt dismissive of women clergy and a woman in the group called him out on it. The second day, he said something about sexuality that just about made the hair on my neck stand up. I spoke up and checked him on it, but I was ready to write him off. And I was ready to skip out of that gathering early, because it was not feeling like a retreat.

But then on the third day, we had to share prayer requests. And when it came to Jim, he said quietly, "I need prayers for my son. He hasn't spoken to me in six years." I resisted the urge to say "Well, I can see why!"

Instead, for a moment, I saw him not as a set of views or a voice I didn't like -- but as a father. A brokenhearted father. And it didn't magically make me agree with him. It didn't make everything okay. But it made me see him as someone worthy of compassion. Worthy of a second look. Worthy of a kind of unity -- not of ideas, but of soul.

And maybe that's where unity starts. Not with agreement, but with seeing the whole person. And then -- staying at the table anyway.

Today is June 1st. Pride Month begins. And that matters for us in the Church, because for a long time, LGBTQ+ people were told they didn't belong at the table. Sometimes they still are told that.

And if we're going to talk about unity, we have to ask unity for *whom*? If we want to take Jesus' prayer seriously, then it's not just about getting along with people we disagree with—it's about making space at the table for the people who've been left out. Not as a gesture. Not as a "they can come if they behave." But as beloved

children of God with gifts, voices, and identities that help the Church more fully reflect the Body of Christ.

And yes, that might create tension with others in the Church who don't see it that way. But the work of unity is not about making everyone feel equally comfortable. The work of unity is making space for grace to do what only grace can do, which is to bind us together as the body of Christ.

So how do we hold this all together? What is the binding ingredient that keeps us in a state of unity? We're not always going to fix the divisions. We won't always get the resolution we want.

But there is one thing we can practice every day, and that's humility.

Humility says: "I don't know the whole story."

Humility says: "I might be wrong."

Humility says: "This person is more than the sum of their worst opinion."

Humility doesn't mean being a doormat. It just means refusing to let our egos run the show.

The early Christian tradition knew this. St. Benedict, in his *Rule*, calls humility the foundation of all spiritual growth. He even lays out a ladder of humility -- twelve steps of descending ego, so we can ascend toward God. For Benedict, humility isn't self-hatred. It's a clear-eyed honesty about who we are in relation to others and to God.

And St. Francis -- who gave away everything for the sake of love -- used to say, "What a person is before God, that he is, and nothing more." Francis wasn't interested in performance. He wanted to live a life stripped of pride, so he could see the world—and other people—through Christ's eyes.

It's humility that keeps us in the room. Humility that keeps us listening. Humility that makes us pause before hitting "send" on that email or walking out of that conversation.

Because if unity is going to be more than a church buzzword—if it's going to be real—it needs humility like soil needs rain.

And here's the part that gives me hope: Jesus didn't just pray for unity once and leave it to us to figure out.

Jesus still prays for us.

When we avoid each other...

When we hurt each other...

When we build walls instead of bridges...

Jesus still prays: "That they may be one."

So here's the charge:

This week, choose unity -- not because it's easy, but because it's holy.

Choose humility -- not because you're small, but because God is big.

Choose love -- even for the ones who are hard to love -- because that's how the world will know who we belong to.

Keep showing up. Keep listening. Keep the door open.

Because the prayer Jesus prayed -- he prayed for us. How would it feel to be the answer to his prayer?

Amen.