

The Rev. Canon Dr. Mark Gatza

As long-time rector of a parish with three very different services, I have often meditated on the concepts of unity and uniformity. The *www.dictionary.com* entry for “unity” illustrates the crucial point well. It defines unity as “absence of diversity,” in citation four, but the two previous to it sound remarkably like what St. Paul was trying to say in his analogy of the Body of Christ in I Corinthians 12. John 17:11 is a singularly important text to any biblical theology of unity, according to the definition “a whole or totality as combining all its parts into one.”

Anyone with an understanding of Jewish tradition listening to Jesus speak this prayer-poem would have heard a strong echo of the opening of the *Shema*, the most important prayer in the Hebrew Scriptures: “Hear, O Israel, the lord your God the lord is One!” (Deut. 6:4) **dx'(a**, (pronounced “e-'had”) is used in this prayer as a powerful and mystical claim about the essence of God as unity itself. And yet from the very beginning of the biblical narrative the reflection of that unity is diversity. When the angel of the lord appears to Abraham to make good on the promise to make him the father of a great nation, it is not one man who appears but three. For Paul, the Church itself is composed of many different parts united into one by the head. Finally, as the early Church reflected on the words of Jesus (collected in four Gospels, not one!) and the writings of Peter, Paul and others, it became clear that the very nature of God is a Trinity of three persons in dynamic relationship with each other. Thus the words of Jesus.

Archbishop William Temple wrote, “The purpose of God in creation was, and is, to fashion a fellowship of free spirits knit together by a love in all its members¹ There is no better description of the nature of the divinely inspired relationship that can turn diversity into unity. St. Paul understood this as well as St. John, and thus after describing the unity of the body in I Corinthians 12, he goes on to characterize love itself in chapter 13.

The spirit of unity must be rooted in love and evidenced in public trust. It must be characterized by humility in the face of differences, rather than boastfulness, since none of us is complete in and of ourselves. The spirit of unity works through dynamic relationships, rather than through theological declarations or adversarial legislation. As a Christian, I believe that the power of God’s Holy Spirit working in us makes it possible to live into this vision of unity. The fact that my sins are forgiven in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, bringing me into a renewed relationship with God, gives me confidence that reconciliation is not just a theoretical possibility and hope that we can powerfully change the world by sharing this good news.

I also have some experiential sense of what it means to bring unity out of diversity. In 1992 I was invited to join a monthly study group, intentionally including clergy that represented as much diversity as we had in Maryland. We were male and female, African American and anglo, conservative, liberal and somewhere in between. We prayed together, we read scripture together, we studied texts together, we ate together. Over the 10 year life of the group, we built up a safe and trusting place to be in real dialog about difficult issues. But the most fulfilling moment came when we completed work on a contemporary Eucharistic liturgy that we felt honored all of our differences. In fact, the liturgy was first used publicly at the consecration of the Rt. Rev. John Rabb as bishop suffragan of Maryland

The enemy of unity is anxiety (which seems to be Satan’s chief tool in the world today!). Sometimes anxiety comes simply from an absence of uniformity. Over the years the study group met many of us felt the anxiety about our differences melt away, and in a real sense we became the sort of fellowship that Temple describes. I believe that the spirit of unity that we shared can be infectious, and that it can and should grow in the Diocese of Maryland.

¹ *Readings in St. John's Gospel (1st and 2nd Series)*, Macmillan & Co., London, 1955, p. 319