

The Rev. Dr. John C. N. Hall

When walking among the massive coastal redwoods in the Muir Woods National Park north of San Francisco, one speaks in hushed tones. Dwarfed in the deep shade of these colossal trees, one senses the sacred nature of an ancient cathedral. The tallest redwoods are reaching higher than the Statue of Liberty. The oldest began growing before Christ was born. Yet, these top-heavy giants have shallow roots and would easily be felled by the constant coastal wind if growing alone. So, as if by some divine command, the trees grow in groups, with roots twisted and intertwined to form a vast labyrinth of support for all, just below the surface. This unseen mesh of connectedness binds the forest into one vast living organism with unifying strength, and allows each individual to reach in safety toward heaven. The trees are one.

In the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus prays that his followers would be kept in safety as one. Seeking unity for those he loves, Christ petitions the Father saying, “Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one just as you and I are one.” The Profile of the Diocese of Maryland attests that it is this unity, spoken of by Christ in prayer, for which the people long, the desire for God-given oneness, to live together “as one Body in Christ, one Diocese of Maryland,” and to be reconciled to each other, to the world and to God.

Some might say a realistic look at the Episcopal Church suggests that all is not well. Others find the Church poised for new learning, new growth, and a bright future. Certainly, universal agreement is neither a hallmark of the Episcopal Church in this present moment, nor has it been in times past. Nevertheless, while the Lord Jesus in his “high priestly prayer,” as it is sometimes called, prays for unity, Christ is not ordering his followers into oneness, as some action of collective will. Rather, Christ is praying that God will preserve his loved ones in the unity that is already theirs in Jesus’ name. “Keep them safe by the power of your name, the name you gave me...” he prays. It is by belonging to Christ, by gathering in the name of Jesus, that the Church’s roots are kept bound together. The Diocese of Maryland, and the Episcopal Church are, in fact, already one in Christ Jesus by the will of God.

The fourth chapter of Ephesians provides the first words of the service of Holy Baptism. “There is one Body and one Spirit; there is one hope in God’s call to us.” In claiming the promises made at Baptism, Christians live as beloved sisters and brothers, and members of one Body, the Church. Saint Paul’s wonderful description of the Church as the Body of Christ, complete with eyes, ears, nose, and hands, in his first letter to Corinth reveals the Church’s diversity in the midst of its unity in Christ. This unity in the body does not necessarily equate to uniformity, or even agreement, however. An eye and a toe behave differently. They are one in the body and still surprisingly unique. Yet, the Body of Christ, when functioning optimally, seeks to live by one simple rule: agreement follows unity rather than unity following agreement.

The faithful members of the Body of Christ in the Diocese of Maryland are like the magnificent redwoods along the Pacific coast, they already are knit together in unity, rooted as one in the name of Jesus Christ. If, by God’s grace, I were to be called as the 14th Bishop of Maryland, I would guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church, and, in Jesus’ name, invite others to join in the ministry of reconciliation, claiming and living in the Spirit of Christian unity as one Body in Christ, one Diocese of Maryland.