

The Rev. Canon Eugene Taylor Sutton

Jesus, nearing the end of his earthly ministry and preparing for his own suffering on the Cross, prays for his disciples “that they may be one,” just as he and the Father are one. This passage of scripture is one of the dearest to my heart, one that I recite frequently while leading retreats, teaching about prayer, or giving talks on the relationship between spirituality and mission.

The unity that our Lord longs for among his followers is rooted in the nature of the divine life itself, and is exemplified by the intimate relationship between the one “praying” (Jesus) and the one being “prayed to” (the Father), on behalf of those being “prayed for” (the disciples). Jesus’ prayer is for his followers to be “in” God (what an astounding invitation!) just as he is “in” the Father and the Father “in” him, resulting in a divine-human mystical union that has the power to transform “the world.” When his followers are “one,” they mirror the kind of the relationship between the Son and the Father. This is a unity rooted in prayer, cemented by love, and sent forth in action “... *so that the world may believe.*” (Jn 17:20)

I believe that the Diocese of Maryland, because of its great diversity and complexity within the worldwide Anglican Communion, is in an excellent position to demonstrate to the world that the kind of Christian unity that Jesus envisions in John 17 is the most powerful and effective means of evangelism and mission in the world today. Our mission as a church can be summed up with these words from St. Paul:

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor 5:17-20)

Throughout my 26 years in ordained ministry I have been known by my clergy colleagues and lay readers as a healer and a reconciler. On one occasion, when I was assistant to the bishop in the Diocese of New Jersey, a family-sized parish had been conflicted over the continued ministry of an ineffectual interim priest-in-charge. The conflict had grown to a debilitating level, and clearly the priest was overwhelmed by the problems and was unprepared to work through the issues. It would have been canonically easy for the bishop to remove him rather quickly, but the congregation was divided over his ministry, so I advised the bishop that the “easiest” path to resolution is not always the best one in terms of the long-term health of both the parish and the priest. Having been granted his permission to try to resolve the conflict, I began a series of meetings with lay leaders (on both sides of the conflict) and with the priest, which led ultimately to a mutual decision by all parties on a timetable for the dissolution of that pastoral relationship and a process for moving the parish forward. The priest was reassigned at the agreed upon time to another parish that better suited his gifts and talents and the parish did not “split” but came together to serve a new vision for ministry.

One of the things that experience taught me is that there is no situation in the church – however toxic, distrustful or destructive – that cannot be redeemed for the larger work of the kingdom. Our ministry is one of reconciliation; we dare not give up on each other. And our call to be “one as Jesus and the Father are one” is not a call for “uniformity” – as if we will all agree, having the same liturgical practices, having the same theological/ethical positions, etc. – but rather is a call for *unity*: united in love, prayer and mission. Why should the world believe in our message of God’s love for the world if we Christians cannot find a way to exhibit it among ourselves in unity?

I have learned that we can get there by following the way of Jesus. Jesus spent hours praying, becoming

intimately connected to the Father, and that connection led him from his knees to do the work he was sent to do. Guided by the Spirit, he showed compassion on outcasts and sinners, healed that which was broken in them and in society, and began the work of reconciling the world to God. I am very committed to this ministry; my major goal this year is to found the Community of Reconciliation, a non-geographical Benedictine spiritual community of men and women who give themselves to prayer, Scripture meditation, holy refreshment, and the work of reconciliation in their communities and in the world. We are all called to this work, and my prayer is that in doing so the Diocese of Maryland may be *completely one*, as Jesus and the Father are *one*, in prayer and mission.