

On Your Behalf  
John 17. 20 -27  
Rev. Dr. Bill Crawford  
A Sermon Preaches at the Larchmont Avenue Church  
May 16, 2010

There has been a particular issue here in the life of the Larchmont Avenue Church about which, I confess, I have avoided any public discussion. It has been brewing for a good while. Some folks have been very particular in their expressions. After all, it is a topic which – I am sure you will agree -- elicits some very personal, very subjective opinions and tastes. And then, there are some people who could care less. Parenthetically, I know that we are not alone as a church which has had to deal with this issue. OK, what am I talking about? It's . . . coffee!

Now, there have been some here at LAC who have been quite expressive about the coffee we serve here at coffee hour. When I first arrived ten years ago, some people cornered me . . . suggesting that I might take this on right away. I innocently asked, in my most pastoral way: “Really, what is it about the coffee? Could you tell me?” And then I found out.

And these folks said: “Bill, it’s decaf! LAC only serves decaf. We need caffeinated!” One person even suggested that “Decaf before noon is against my religion. Why can’t we have caffienated coffee.” On the other hand, there were/are folks who are very concerned about caffeine, and didn’t want to touch the stuff . . . whether it’s at 9 at night or 9 in the morning.” And so it was, that prior to my arrival here at this wonderful church, the coffee served at the coffee hour was always, totally, exclusively . . . decaffeinated!

I’m very happy to say that it wasn’t long before our coffee hour began serving both decaf and caffeinated coffee, as we have it today, not to mention that our coffee hour has become a wonderful gathering place and time for younger and older folks in fellowship – let’s do all we can to keep our coffee hour alive and well-fortified; such hospitality is a very important part of our ministry here at LAC.

In the Gospel lesson this Lord’s Day, the prayer that Jesus prays, as we come upon it, is a farewell. He is saying these words at the Last Supper. The verses that immediately follow this passage are the account of the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus goes to be at prayer. On this Sunday before Pentecost – the beginning of the church -- this traditionally-read passage, along with the verses we heard in the Acts of the Apostles, reflect the cost of service and calling of the Gospel. These words before us, from Jesus in John, are followed by the passion of Christ and the way of the Cross. He prays that they may be one.

He has been witness to their differences and disputes and disagreements. The disciples have not always been on the same page . . . with one another or with Jesus . . . It’s like they’ve been saying: “Yeah I know. “ and “Yes, I will.” But, doing otherwise. Preferring something else, while nodding their head in agreement . . . or *outrightly*, voicing their

own disagreement. At that supper – God only knows if they served decaf or caffeinated, or both -- but there at the table, James and John – close friends – were in sharp disagreement about who would sit where, at the meal as well as in the kingdom to come. Peter, of course was there, the one who was always “yes” in the light of day, but “no” in the shadows. And then, there was Judas, in his outright betrayal.

The array of human behavior, our humanness, is reflected in the disciples across Jesus’ ministry – mirrored to us, mirroring us . . .

And here, after the walk and journey from Galilee – parables and teaching, healing, confronting the religious authorities – the Pharisees and their love of the law (as opposed to the law of God’s love). Here after, all that, at the table where he gives them the Great commandment – above all others -- that they love one another. And then, after he has broken the bread and poured out the cup, he prays for them, for us . . . that they may be one. To God, he prays: “I in them and you in me.” For a relationship like the Cross: both a vertical connection, God and Jesus, and horizontal: believers one with another . . .

This is a call to community, not conformity. To unity, not uniformity . . . We are one in the Spirit, one in the Lord . . . each precious, unique in our own right , as God has us . . .

I remember my own Confirmation Class – as here at LAC we have been on that journey with our ninth grade confirmands, which culminates and commences as they become new members next week, on Pentecost.. As a ninth grader back then, I came before the session, as it will happen here this week, and I listened closely as one of the elders – I remember it was Mr. Remer. Mr. Remer went on about how great it would be if everybody everywhere were a Christian. I remember thinking about how many of my friends were not Christian. And then I remember thinking that, besides, if all of us who were Christian were alike, how strange that would be – especially because I couldn’t, in all due respect, imagine myself growing up to be like Mr. Remer. And I didn’t want to think that becoming a Christian meant that I would have to become like Mr. Remer, who seemed to be grouchy just as much as he was happy. I’m not sure exactly what I said, there at the session meeting because I didn’t want to embarrass my parents (who were also at the meeting, as parents will be with us at session here.).

But I really did appreciate my minister who helped us – allowed us -- to talk about our questions and disagreements – and not only that, he talked about what he questioned too. I told Mr. Remer something like, “Mr. Remer, I don’t think so. That sounds nice. But we don’t have to be the same.” Mr. Remer seemed to agree. At least, I don’t remember him saying anything. And the session voted to receive us confirmands as members. I remember us then praying all together in a circle, holding hands, and I was next to Mr. Remer, holding his.

Years ago I encountered a couple evangelists who were trying to get me to their church. I didn’t tell them I was a minister. But I did try to throw him off script and I asked him, how they solve disagreements in their church. “We don’t have disagreements,” they said.

Well, what about differences of opinion?” “We don’t have differences of opinion.” What kind of church is that? What kind of faith? Jesus call us to be one, not homogenized. Unity is not uniformity, Confirmation is not conformation.

We have our differences, to be sure, among us, and about us in the life of the church, and in world . . . One Sunday, I was greeting someone after the service who thought we had too much and the service was too long. A bit later, same day, I spoke to another person who appreciated different folks’ participation and thought the service seemed short. Matters of mission – serving close-up and local has been a passion, while joining in help beyond, into the world, has been an issue, length of hymns, music genres. Not surprising, among a group intensely divided between Mets and Yankees . . . not to mention those others. Among us, we have an array of positions: Derivatives to some are insurance, to others: they are bets. Politics and public service bring out distinct differences, among us. The walks of life we’ve been traveling; cultures and customs from whence we’ve come. Gender, ages and stages of life . . . all manifest varying expressions among us. Look around, see the gathering that we are, united in God’s love, in Christ . . .

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him, may not perish, but have eternal life.

This is our union in Christ . . . not a stand-alone virtue of unity for its own sake. But, for the sake of the world, as Jesus prays: “So that the world may know that you [God] have sent me and, have loved them [disciples past, present and future ] even as you have loved me.”

In our Presbyterian tradition, one of the chief ends or purposes of the church is “the exhibition of the Kingdom of God to the world.” Looking inside the church is meant to be a glimpse of what God’s love for God’s children looks like. Take a look.

This is why Jesus prays for us to be one. Not to obliterate our differences, but to see that God’s love is big enough to encompass all of them, so that the world may come to know that same love.

Let us realize and share that love, as one, in Christ. Amen.

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