

“THAT THEY MAY BE ONE...”

A SERMON FOR EASTERTIDE

Sunday, June 1, 2014

First Presbyterian Church

Marianna, Florida

Ted W. Land, Interim Pastor

JOHN 17:1-11

It has been nearly half a century since Eugene Carson Blake, then Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, what we used to call the “Northern” Presbyterian Church, preached a sermon on the text I’m using this morning, with the same title, “That They May Be One...”

That sermon rocked Christendom. Blake was not only chief executive officer of the largest reformed and Presbyterian denomination, he was actively involved as President and General Secretary of the National and World Councils of Churches at various times.

In his sermon, he decried the division that existed within the Christian church. He called for what became the Consultation on Church Union and later the Church of Christ Uniting, a movement to bring main-line American Protestant Churches together in one denomination.

A few years before his sermon, delivered in an Episcopal cathedral in San Francisco, Blake had successfully brokered the union between the two branches of the “Northern” church, the old United Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in the United States America. The denomination to which this church belonged at the time, the Presbyterian Church, U.S., better known as the Southern Presbyterian Church, demurred to participate in that union, but a quarter of a century later in 1983, the wounds left by the Civil War were finally healed and North and South united in Atlanta into the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Eugene Carson Blake lived to see that re-union, dying two years later.

Blake dream of a time when Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and all like-minded Christians would be part of one church, one denomination. He dreamed truly that they might all be one.

I wonder what Blake would think of the state of American Christianity, of American Presbyterianism, today, a quarter of a century after reunion.

I suspect he’d be just as dismayed, and maybe even a little disheartened.

Things haven’t gotten better. They’ve gotten worse. There are more divisions, more disunity, more disagreement, more denominations, now than there were then. Than they were in 1960, when he preached his landmark sermon.

He could not have foretold the rise of the non-denominational church, the independent churches, the un-connected and disconnected churches that are a part of the American religious scene in the twenty first century. We've got two large churches like that here in Marianna, Evangel Worship Center and Rivertown Community Church.

Instead of becoming one church united, we are many churches, divided.

And this applies to local churches, as well as denominations.

One of the reasons that we have so many churches is that churches keep splitting, dividing. It has been said that churches are trying to be like amoeba, who multiply by dividing.

That is not what Jesus wanted when He prayed that we would all be one. The church is supposed to be, according to the Apostle Paul, the body of Christ in the world.

Not a single cell organism, but a body made up of many parts, as a human body is made up of different kinds of cells, arranged as different organs. He wanted us to be one Body, not just one cell. Not uniform but unified. He didn't want us to be just alike.

Oh, we are all supposed to be like Him, but we are supposed to be different, with different tasks, different jobs, different roles to play.

We don't all need to sing in the choir. We don't all need to play the organ. We don't all need to preach. We don't all need to run the sound system. We don't all need to usher, or greet, or serve on the Session. But if one part of that organism isn't working, we all suffer. If one part doesn't do its job, then the whole body is impacted.

If you think that the only part, the only job, the only role you have is to take up space in a pew, that is all right. I'd feel mighty foolish preaching to a bunch of empty seats. There are enough of those anyway. If your only tasks are to take up space on Sunday morning and put money in the plate when it is passed, that is all right, but I really think God might have more than that in mind for you. And someday, maybe God will reveal it to you.

You just have to be one...not THE ONE. Jesus is THE ONE. And we need to be one in Him.

That's what Jesus prayed: that we might be one.

That foundation doctrine of Presbyterianism, that we belong to God, is at the heart of what Jesus is praying in this great high priestly prayer.

He wants us all to be one. But He affirms that we belong to God. He says, "They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word...All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them."

The old Westminster Shorter Catechism began with a question about what our chief end was, and the answer was to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever.

We are the body of Christ in the world, and we are to glorify God. And we glorify God in our unity, as well as in our diversity.

I've come to realize that just as everyone in the individual church has a role to play, is a part of the body, so all of the different churches, the different denominations, have a different function, a different task.

Some churches, and by that I mean not just local churches, but denominations, are more evangelical. Some are more oriented towards feeding the hungry, or supporting mission overseas. Some are into agricultural ministries. Others specialize in disaster recovery work. Some are capable of raising great sums of money for important causes. But without the work that one does, the work of all would suffer.

We must never be competitive, but always complementary. We must work together for the kingdom of God, because we are the kingdom of God, and individually colonies of it.

I do not know to what great task God will call this church, First Presbyterian Church of Marianna. Nor do I know to what menial task, what lowly chore, God may call us. But we belong to God, we are a part of the body of Christ in the world, and when the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ, speaks, we must listen, obey, respond.

My prayer is that of Jesus, that when we are called to serve, we may be one.

Let us pray.

Lord, make us one in the spirit. Make us one in the Lord. Give unity in diversity, and unity in purpose, to your church, not just this church, but to all churches in our community, all churches on your planet earth, that Jesus Christ may be glorified and His gospel proclaimed and His love and compassion demonstrated. Amen, and amen.

