

**Christ Church Cranbrook**  
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan  
Sermon for June 1, 2014 ~ The Seventh Sunday of Easter  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Christianity is by God's design essentially corporate in nature. To turn it into a private or individualistic experience is to destroy it by starvation. The New Testament Greek word for church is *ecclesia*, which means "gathering." From the beginning the Church has been the primary element in God's strategy for the redemption of the world. At the outset of his ministry, the first thing Jesus did was to form a community; he called his disciples. His teaching, preaching, and healing ministry was done in company with them and he spent three years forming them into a company of people who would carry on his work after he was gone. Before ascending to the right hand of the Father, Jesus prayed for unity among his disciples. The prayer shows that Jesus intended for his mission to be continued by human beings with divine assistance. It also demonstrates that Jesus understood the human inclination toward divisiveness and polarization. So, as we see in today's passage from the Gospel of John, he specifically prayed for unity among his followers.

We call this prayer "the high priestly prayer." It is called that because Jesus assumes the role of high priest as he intercedes for those whom he has called. "Holy Father," he prays, "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." I submit to you today that living faith is *being* an answer to Jesus' prayer.

The primary way we exercise such living faith is in corporate worship. That is because everything else we do stems from our gathering together for worship. Television Church is okay, but it can never take the place of the experience of standing shoulder to shoulder with someone and confessing the faith we share or belting out a hymn or bowing in prayer or receiving Holy Communion.

Sure, you can worship God in the beauty of nature. But if that experience of worship is all you have, it isn't Christian worship. One of my favorite mystery writers is Nevada Barr. Several years ago, she described her newfound experience of Christian faith in a book called *Seeking Enlightenment Hat by Hat*. In one chapter, she relates how when the subject of going to church came up, her father would say: "Why go in a dark airless building with a bunch of hypocrites on a beautiful Sunday morning when you can be outside in God's country?" She tells how she has finally arrived at an answer to her father's question: "Because God made we hypocrites, too. Because when Jesus said, 'wherever two or more gather in my name, I am there,' he wasn't just whistling Dixie. The mountain is for finding and adoring God in the wilderness. Church is for finding and adoring God in community: with others, through others, because of others, in spite of others. Only by finding this place of human interaction focused around the need for spirituality was I able to recognize God in other people and so, in myself." She goes on to say, "With the exception of the very strong and the very neurotic, most of us feel a need to belong, to be in community." Jesus knew that. So he prayed for oneness in the community so that it might be preserved and his mission continued.

Of course, Jesus also taught his disciples to pray. The prayer he taught is a corporate prayer; "our father...our trespasses...our daily bread." We just cannot be Christian on Jesus' terms if we avoid the corporate worship of God. To reject the community of Christ's followers is to reject him.

There are many reasons why we need to be in our places on Sunday mornings. In addition to joining our voices with the voices of other believers in giving praise and adoration to God and interceding on behalf of others, we have a ministry of presence. By that I mean, by our very presence we encourage our sisters and brothers in the family of God. By our presence, we extend God's welcome as well as that of the community to those God sends through these doors, so that they, too, might be drawn into the family of faith. Faith is being an answer to Jesus' prayer for unity.

And, be clear about this: Jesus was praying for a unity of oneness, not a unity of uniformity. He was asking the Father to protect his family by drawing us together in his great love. Anglicans have always embraced the *via media*, the "middle way," and have resisted the view that unity requires dogmatic like-mindedness. Anglican unity has always been in Christ and in the Eucharist, not in a checklist of beliefs. We seek Christ together in a oneness of the heart on a winding journey where each of us is at a slightly different place, not marching in lock step down a straight highway with all the right answers.

Anglicans and others today are in some turmoil over the essential meaning of unity. There is an insidious fundamentalist religious extremism that cannot tolerate differences afoot in the Church today. Some would have us believe that mainline churches are full of empty pews because of weak clergy, unsound doctrine, and poor moral teaching. I couldn't disagree more. Our pews are empty because we don't expect much from our members. At issue is not weak clergy, doctrine, or moral teaching. (By the way, the recently popular *Left Behind* series and the rapture movement are plenty of evidence that there are full churches preaching unsound doctrine based on a perversion of the scriptures.) What is at issue is the level of commitment we expect from our members. It is not that we don't stand for anything, because we do. We just don't happen to agree with those who so freely write off those who disagree with them. Wherever you find a truly dynamic great church today, you will find members who understand that they are expected to show up, tithe, spend time in fellowship, learning, service, and prayer with their family of faith. That's what it will take here, too!

And it's not only the Church that is facing this threat of religious extremism. We live in a world that is constantly under the threat of extremists, particularly religious extremists. Those of us who tend seek a middle way must defend it as vigorously as those who promote the extremes, though our defense must be through peaceful means in alignment with our core teachings. What do you think is at the root of the turmoil in the Middle East if it is not religious extremism. It is food for thought on this day when we are made aware of the heart of our savior who prayed for oneness among his followers, not simply for their own sake, but for the sake of the world into which he sends us to bear his gospel and proclaim his kingdom, that his will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We don't come here to worship the Bible, or the preacher, or the organ, or the edifice. We don't come to agree on all things. We come together in faith to worship Jesus Christ who asked the Father to make us one and who gave us the Holy Spirit to make that oneness real. God wants to accomplish great things through this church. There is not one thing that is on God's "to do" list for Christ Church Cranbrook is impossible. The first step is to exercise the faith that is in us by being in worship and living in that oneness for which Jesus prayed. *Being* an answer to that prayer is the first step in being a truly great Church carrying on God's work with excellence, with purpose, and with faith-filled hearts, just as Christ intended.