

## **Boy-Oh-Boy**

John 17:20-26

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“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,

I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me.

I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

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May 29, 2022

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### **I.**

I would like to start today with a question: do you think is it easier to *know*, or to *be known*? (Take a few moments to consider.). Out of curiosity, how many people chose the answer, that it is easier to *know*? Ok, how many chose the other, that it is easier to *be known*? To tell you the truth, I can't figure it out. When I first started considering the question I assumed most people would say that it is easier to *be known*, just because there is so much to know. Then, I started asking people the question; people I know, people I respect, even strangers, male and female, young and old, and I got both answers, and for reasons I did not anticipate. I'm not so sure there is a "right" answer, but what I came to realize, is that the way people answer the question says a lot about the perspective from which they see the world and themselves.

### **II.**

Of course, it is always risky to ask such a question in a sermon, as you might end up saying things very contrary to what people believe. For me, though, the act of *having* faith is, perhaps, among the riskiest things we can do. I'm not sure if one necessarily needs to associate faith with the notion of "heaven," but more often than not, this is the case; either explicitly or implicitly. What such a heaven might look and feel like is variously debated, and subject to one's own imaginings. In turning to scripture for answers, we must concede that the details aren't very forthcoming. The best we can ascertain, is that Heaven is a home with God. Moreover, heaven is not just just a home *with* God, but a home *in* God. A place, such as it is, of no separation *from* God. We aren't simply under the same roof with God, existing in one room with God in another; but, instead, God *is* the abode and we are, finally, *one* with him/her/it...again.

### III.

Our scripture reading for today, John 17: 20-26 speaks directly to the notion of Oneness. The passage begins with Jesus praying to God that his followers “*may all be one*” so that, Jesus states, “*As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us; so that they may be one, as we are one.*” So, at the very least, we can imagine two distinct “Ones” which are of a kind: the One that is Christ’s believers, the church, but also, the One that is Jesus and God. However, Jesus then goes on to say, “*I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*” So, not only are these two distinct Ones “of a kind,” these two Ones are also *relational*: that is, the One that is the church, follows from, and is a function of, the One that is Jesus and the Father; with love being that which, both, creates these One(s) and constitutes the relationship between them.

### IV.

Now, this is a pretty tricky concept, so to get at it a bit, we’re going to seek assistance from the world of Mathematics. Jesus, in essence, is making a claim using the Transitive Property of Equality, which states: if  $A = B$ , and  $B = C$ , then  $A$  (also)  $= C$ . If God is One with Jesus, and Jesus is One with the church, then God is One with the church. However, the mathematical notion of “equality” could be a cause for confusion, if not heresy, so let’s change the language to align with the text: if God is in Jesus and Jesus in God and Jesus is in the Church and the Church in Jesus, then God is in the Church and the Church is in God. Of significance, we note that Jesus uses the phrase “*in each other*” rather than “*with each other.*” And thereby, as the Bard would say, hangs the tale.

### V.

Now, I know I’m about to ask us to slice the baloney *incredibly* thin, but this is precisely what it means to have an “informed faith”; something for which we always strive here on the Park. The word “in” is translated from the Greek “EN” (Epsilon Nu) which is a “primary preposition”; that is, a part of speech that articulates the relationship between words. For such a small word, “in” has a rather complex meaning, denoting *a (fixed) position in place, time or state; in the middle or midst of; the means or agency of usefulness or benefit; and/or a place of rest in between the starting place and the ending place.*

When we speak of God “with” us, what we mean is we are *proximal* to God. But, when we speak for being “in” God, and God “in” us, what we mean is that we are integral to God and God is integral to us. Not an insignificant distinction.

## **VI.**

This, really, is the tip of today’s spear. So, before we go any further, we need to talk about just a bit is this idea of being “integral.” I’m not so sure this is the best word to use to articulate what it means to be “in God” it is, however, the best I could devise. “Integral” is defined as “*necessary to make a whole complete, essential or fundamental.*” Certainly, it is easy to accept that God “in us” makes *us* One, or completes *us*; more difficult, though, is the idea that *we* complete *God*, which we certainly do not, and cannot.

One of the basic tenets of the Christian faith is the absolute distinction between Creator and Creation. However, that line sometimes gets fuzzy, and it has been so for many ages. At this point, it would be helpful to travel back in time to the year 325, to a city in Turkey which, at that time, was known as Nicea; modern day Iznik.

## **VII.**

It was here that early Christian church leaders, from both the eastern and western expressions of the faith, convened the Council of Nicea, presided over by the emperor Constantine, to address the “The Arian Controversy.” Arius was a Christian presbyter (that is, elder) living in Alexandria of Egypt who espoused a *non*-trinitarian Christological doctrine which asserted the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who was begotten by God at a point in time, a creature distinct from God and, therefore, subordinate to God, but who is also God.

Hence, you can see the issue: is Christ part of creation or part of the Creator? A very fuzzy line indeed. The resolution of this particular fuzziness, which became known as the Nicene Creed, is the first step, historically and theologically, in articulating our, now, orthodox notion of the Trinity. So, we are laying some excellent groundwork for two weeks from today (after next week’s Pentecost) when we will celebrate Trinity Sunday.

## VIII.

The solution to the Arian controversy was a matter of simple rather than easy and, really, exquisitely elegant: *Homoousios*. *Homoousios* is the fundamental Christian Doctrine which definitively asserts that God the Son and God the Father are of *one Substance*; alternatively translated as “of one *Essence*” or “of one *Being*” (as is the case in the Nicene Creed we read earlier from our hymnal). This is a *critical* distinction for our faith, both then and now; and, for our purposes today, helps to pull us back just enough to prevent us from crossing that fuzzy line which separates Creator from creation.

More than simply “with” Christ/God, we are “in” Christ; this we’ve established. However, being “in” Christ does not mean we are necessarily “of one *Substance*” with Christ/Father. Right about now I bet all of you are saying, it is easier to be known than to know all of *this*. So, let’s see if we can’t pull this all together. As we should always do, we return to scripture.

## IX.

At the end today’s passage, Jesus concludes with these words: *Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*” Too often, I realize, we understand knowledge to be *cerebral* rather than *visceral*; to be more about *ideas* rather than *experiences*, more about *thoughts* rather than *emotions*. However, Jesus is clearly making a connection between knowledge and love.

To fully love someone is not just to *know* the other, and to allow yourself to be *known* by the other, but it is also to experience the other and have them experience you. And the more you know and are known, the more you experience and are experienced, the more love grows and deepens and the more you become one with the other person.

## X.

We cease to be simply *with* each other, we come to be *in* each other; but not, necessarily, *of* each other. Though we maintain our individuality, our distinctiveness, who we are increasing becomes a function of who we are as we are one in each other. So, let’s rephrase the original question: “Is it easier to love or to be loved?” Again, I’m not so sure there is a “right” answer, but the

way we answer this question also says a lot about the perspective from which we see the world and ourselves.

Our scripture passage for today, John 17:20-26, is, I think, about the shift of perspective from existing *outside* the One to existing *inside* of the One; a movement from an *objective* perspective of *knowing* to a *subjective* perspective of *loving*. Recognize, that this shift of perspective which Jesus is espousing is both radical and risky.

## **XI.**

In the anticipation of a busy and back-loaded week, and with our daughter visiting for the weekend, I actually wrote today's sermon on Monday. At this point in that initial version I was going to tell you by way of example what I consider to be a very lovely story of how we, as a congregation, engage in the radical and risky business of loving each other. The short version is while I was away Ella called the church concerned about Carolyn, Jarrett proactively emailed the Deacons and copied me, I texted Jane, Jane was in route home from visiting family but the next day did a wellness check on Carolyn and everything turned out honky-dory. However, on Tuesday a young man (a boy, really) walked into an elementary school in Texas armed with a high capacity assault weapon purchased the week before on his 18th birthday, and shot and killed two teachers, along with 19 children, all 9 and 10 year olds.

## **XII.**

There is simply *no* way we could *not* talk about this today. I want to be sure, though, that we talk about what matters to us, specifically, as members of the One who are in each other, and God in us. What we will *not* be talking about is how you cannot legally purchase alcohol or cannabis in this country until you are 21 years old, but you can legally buy a gun at 18. Neither will we be talking about one's individual "right" to do so over and against the responsibility we each have for the safety and well-being of our larger society; not to mention our kids. We will also refrain from discussing the politics of polarization and opportunism which drive the debate, as each successive mass shooting once again sends everyone scurrying to their respective corners and removes any possibility of reasonable and necessary compromise. And, we will not be talking about a rampant culture of violence, paranoia and desensitvity, let alone how these are manifested in racism and despair.

### **XIII.**

Instead, the headline we *will* talk about today is the one which read, “A local student and loner with few, if any, friends.” Whenever an event such as this happens, and it happens all too frequently and increasingly so in our country (and in *our* country in particular) our first reaction is, “someone had got to *do* something.” Usually this means someone *else* has to do something. Occasionally, a few will say, “*I* have to do something.”

Then, after the funerals have happened, the dead are buried, and a sufficient number of days have passed, the wounds scab over and a relative few are left to spend the rest of their lives fighting off the infection of grief from a hurt which will never really heal. Issues are left unresolved, legislation languishes, and the vast majority of us retreat to the ambient level of uncomfortableness to which we’ve become accustomed. Until the next time, and we all know there *will* be a next time.

### **XIV.**

While I am well aware that there are things each of us, as individual citizens, *should* do, and much that *could* be done, I hope to leave you today with the realization that we, as a church, are in fact and indeed, are *already* doing something, all the time; but boy-oh-boy, do we ever need to *keep* doing it. The most dangerous person in the world is the one who believes they have nothing to lose...and then picks up a gun.

What kind of gun, and who is allowed to pick it up, is certainly a critical part of that equation. The other part, though, is just as critical: how to realize and remember each and everyone of us belongs to the One. That we are in each other, and that others are in us, and that we are all One in God. Not only do we have *everything* to gain, have *already* gained everything.

### **XV.**

That’s the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Each of us has made the decision to assume the responsibility of having a role in such Good News through the body of Christ which is this community of faith; and this is no small task. We ask hard and even radical questions here as we seek to learn and *to know*; about God, our world and ourselves. We risk sharing who we are with each other, telling our stories, opening our lives and baring our souls

that through such vulnerability we might *be known* to each other. Even and especially those who have few, if any, friends and feel alone in this world.

Through the support and succor we offer to the community, and the nurture and care we provide to each other's children, the sick, and to those who are aging, we seek *to radically love* one another. Even and especially those who have few, if any, friends and feel alone in this world.

## **XVI.**

And, through our faith, we risk opening our hearts and souls to the healing and hope, to the grace and mercy which abounds in Christ and in this congregation as we seek *to be loved* by each other and by God. Even and especially those who have few, if any, friends and feel alone in this world.

Yes, somebody needs to *do* something, this is *the* thing which needs to be done, and this is what *we* are doing. We do all of this, knowing and being known, loving and being loved, through our worship, mission, fellowship, and by being *integral* to each other's lives. Through Christ in us, and God in Christ, we are becoming completely One. Even and especially those who have few, if any, friends and feel alone in this world. Just as Jesus hoped, just as God intended, and just so the world *may* believe; and boy-oh-boy, after this week, does the world ever need *to* believe. Amen.