

We're worshipping in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, using the 1604 version of the Book of Common Prayer. Our chaplain, the Rev. Robert Hunt, is presiding. And now it's time for the homily, and Mr. Hunt gets up to preach. And it is entirely likely that he would begin his homily something like this:

"This day, good Christian people, shall be declared unto you, the unprofitableness and shameful dishonesty of contention, strife, and debate; to the intent that, when you shall see...the evil-favouredness and deformity of this most detestable vice, your stomachs may be moved to rise against it, and to detest and abhor that sin, which is so much to be hated, and pernicious and hurtful to all men.

"But among all kinds of contention, none is more hurtful than is contention in matters of religion...How the church is divided! O how the cities be cut and mangled! O how the coat of Christ, that was without seam, is all too rent and torn! O body mystical of Christ, where is that holy and happy unity..? If one member be pulled from another, where is the body? If the body be drawn from the head, where is the life of the body? We cannot be joined to Christ our head, except we be glued with concord and charity one to another...Contention causeth division, wherefore it ought not to be among Christians, whom one faith and baptism joineth in an unity."¹

Rather a mouthful, isn't it?—or an earful?

What I just read was the beginning of the homily "Against Contention and Brawling," from the Book of Homilies that the Rev. Mr. Hunt would certainly have carried with him from England. Mr. Hunt ministered in Jamestown for a little over a year; and with two services every Sunday, his congregation in Jamestown would probably have heard him read most of the 33 homilies in the book. It's possible that Mr. Hunt actually composed some of his own sermons, but it's a pretty sure thing that he also read from the Book of Homilies. In 1607, that would have been standard procedure.

The leaders of the Church of England produced the Book of Homilies during the reigns of King Edward, Henry VIII's son, and Queen Elizabeth I. These homilies were a far cry from what we think of as liturgical homilies today. Today, typically, a preacher starts with one or two of the Sunday readings, studies and meditates on them, and finds ways to apply the scripture to the current realities of life in the gathered community. The homilies in the Book of Homilies operated just the other way. A homily began with a point of doctrine or a theme and argued it almost like a legal case. Scriptural material from all over the bible was brought in to support the argument. And a parish pastor would have read these 33 homilies during services over and over, year after year, so that the people actually began to memorize them.

It may sound hopelessly tiresome, but there was a reason for it. Two reasons, really. First of all in the 16th and 17th centuries, most of the clergy were very poorly educated, and couldn't be trusted to be able to read the scripture responsibly and interpret it for their people. So learned churchmen wrote up homilies that were guaranteed to present sound doctrine. The homilies

were vetted by people like the Archbishop of Canterbury, and, interestingly, by Queen Elizabeth herself.

Which brings us to the second reason for the standard Book of Homilies. Remember that the Church of England's break from Rome was still very, very new,² and there had been a tremendous amount of upheaval in the English church—much of it quite bloody. After Queen Elizabeth I succeeded to the throne in 1558, she herself demanded that the homilies be used so that everyone in the church would be hearing the same party line on doctrine and on church polity. Now, we often think of Queen Elizabeth as rather a liberal about what people believed. There is that famous statement of hers about not needing to look into the hearts of her subjects. But she had her limits. Where Elizabeth was *absolutely* clear was in the area of *political* dissent. And what we need always to keep in mind is that in the Elizabethan world, the church and the kingdom emphatically had the same head. If you leaned too far in the direction of Roman Catholic doctrine, for example, it could mean that you were in league with another European power that intended to overthrow Elizabeth's rule.

So the Book of 33 Homilies was published to make sure everyone was being taught the official Church of England line. Every Sunday, everyone in the Church of England worshiped with the same liturgy. And every Sunday, everyone heard one of the 33 standardized homilies on doctrine and church governance. And that was what was meant by the unity of the church in the early years of the English Reformation.

I wonder how many of us would be happy with that kind of unity today.

The part of John's Gospel we heard a few moments ago suggests a different kind of unity. Jesus prays, "that they may be one, as we are one." Let's think for a minute what that could mean. What does Jesus mean when he says, "one, as we are one"?

I think right away about the way John's Gospel starts: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God." From the very first verse, John struggles to express the mystery of Jesus—that he *was* God and *apart from God* at the same time. As a man, he prays to God from a place apart, but also as a man, he reveals God by being transparent to God's power. We look at Jesus and say, "That's what God looks like."

When Jesus prays that his followers may be one as he and the Father are one, he is praying all of us into this mystery, too. Not just that we should each become one with God, or one with Christ, but that we should become one with each other in the way Jesus and the Father are one.

In some ways, the first part of that mystery is the easy part. We all have our ways to grow in our oneness with God. We may ground our own growth in corporate worship. We may follow a spiritual discipline of private prayer, study, and service in God's name. We may dedicate ourselves to a particular ministry in a cause of justice, or healing, or pastoral presence. And no matter which path we follow toward oneness with God, the Holy Spirit can act in our lives to draw us closer, and to reveal to us the presence of God that is already nearer to us than our own

heartbeats. We have only to open our eyes and our ears, and remain willing to receive and respond.

But Jesus is also praying that his followers might be one with one another. And that, of course, is where the pain lies for us today. “Among all kinds of contention,” says that homily they would have heard in Jamestown, “among all kinds of contention, none is more hurtful than is contention in matters of religion.” Gathered here today, for the reasons we have gathered, we would probably agree with him.

There is plenty of contention and disagreement in this church of ours, in this church of Jesus Christ. We have our denominations and our sub-denominations. We argue over who can be ordained, and we argue over what words we can use when we pray. We argue over our alliances with this or that group around the world, or around the province, or within our parish community. It causes enormous pain. But perhaps it’s helpful to remember that it’s also nothing new.

When there were still people walking the streets who had known Jesus face to face, the Christian community was arguing. They argued over who could share a meal. They argued over whose party represented the “real” church. They argued over whether you were really a Christian if you didn’t exhibit certain spiritual gifts. So just now, I have to wonder whether all this contention, in the past and in the present, means that Jesus’ prayer has never been answered.

Somehow, that doesn’t seem right. So if I’m going to have faith that God answers prayer, and that God *has* answered and *is answering* Jesus’ prayer, then it seems to me that what I need to do is think differently, somehow, when I think about Christian unity.

Jesus prayed “that they may be one, *as we are one*.” “The Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God.” The ancient theologians who studied these very verses talked about Jesus’ oneness with the Father in terms of *movement*—a kind of dance among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. What if the answer to Jesus’ prayer for unity was not about sort of solidifying into a monolithic block, but rather was about joyful movement, interplay, glorious dancing? If we tried that idea on for awhile, could it affect how we view our own disagreements with our brothers and sisters?

It’s just possible that *this is* what Christian unity looks like. A body, as St. Paul said, with many parts, a dance with many dancers, a song with many voices. The challenge to us, in response to all this variety, is to say yes. Yes, those *other* people really are Christians, too. Yes, there is pain in all this diversity, but there is also possibility. Yes, there is struggle, but there is also glory.

Jesus is still praying for us, that we all may be one. Let’s trust that, and rejoice in this wild and frustrating and crazy community of ours.

¹ “A Sermon Against Contention and Brawling” in *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be read in Churches in the time of Queen Elizabeth*. Philadelphia, 1855. University of Michigan Historical Reprint Series.

² 1534, to be precise.