

**Sermon for May 28, 2017 (Ascension Sunday, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: 1 Peter 4:12-14,5:6-11; Psalm 68:1-10,33-36; John 17:1-11

Title: The Spirit of Glory

My dear friends: what is the glory of God?

What is the glory of God?

We just heard the first half of the high priestly prayer of Jesus found in the 17th chapter of John. This prayer is filled with the idea of the glory of God.

Jesus prayed: “Now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed” (John 17:5).

But what is that? What is the glory that Jesus and the Father shared before the earth was formed?

Well, first and foremost, let’s be clear that no one knows. No human being has any clue about the glory of God’s own being. And no one living on earth will ever know.

However, let me suggest to you that the Bible does explain what the glory of God looks like. It explains how we humans perceive the glory of God.

And it’s quite simple: we see the glory of God when we see unity. Oneness. Togetherness.

How do we reach that conclusion?

Consider first of all the glory of God that was present within the Godhead before the world existed.

Again, we truly can never understand this, for we are mortals, made of dust and to dust we shall return.

But what we do know is that the Persons of the Godhead are united together perfectly in bonds of love. In theological terms, we call this perichoresis – the Sacred Three living and moving together in perfect choreography. Never out of sync.

Look again at the words of this great mystical prayer: “They were yours, and you gave them to me...All yours are mine and mine are yours.”

Together, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit share a perfect harmony of will.

Before the reading of the Word today, we prayed the Collect which ended in this way: “through Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting.”

There it is! On full display for all to see! God governing the universe in perfect harmony and unity. In total oneness that can never be broken. Separate Persons in harmony that lasts forever.

Try this out: whenever you hear the words “the glory of God”, think of this: perfect unity and harmony.

So then it makes perfect sense for the Lord to end this prayer focused on the glory of God by asking that his people share in this divine unity and harmony.

He says: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:11).

Jesus calls the apostles together, Jesus creates the church so that we might manifest the glory of God in this world. So that we might give people a glimpse of that unity which lies at the very heart of God’s own being!

It is even clearer just a few verses further past our passage today, but in the same prayer, when the Lord speaks to the Father like this: “The glory that you have given me – [the perfect harmony and unity of being] - that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:22).

My friends, this is our calling, our purpose, our job on earth! This is WHY we are called and chosen and redeemed!

To embody the glory of God by living together in harmony in the same way that God lives for eternity. It's beautiful, amazing, and breath-taking.

But there is a problem, right? In actual practice, do we see the church giving the world a glimpse of divine unity and harmony?

Do we see the disciples of Jesus animated by the Holy Spirit in a way that clearly shows a supernatural kind of unity?

No, sadly, we do not see this at all.

But this is where it counts. As we all know, actions speak louder than words.

People can say all kinds of wonderful things about love and harmony and peace and stuff like that, but what are they actually doing?

What is the actual fruit of their lives?

To be honest, it is amazing how much resistance there is to pursuing actual unity within the Church. When it comes down to doing something about unity, everyone seems to think that they have it right – and that the others have it wrong!

Last week, a major new initiative was announced to permit an agreement of full communion between our Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church.

To be clear, "full communion" means that we agree to recognize each other as fully legitimate and valid churches, that we recognize the ordinations of our clergy as valid, that we recognize each other's sacraments as valid, and that we agree to share together in the consecration of each other's bishops in the future.

It is not a merger or anything like that. It is simply full sharing in ministry, allowing Episcopalians and United Methodists to work together without any official reservations about one another to hold us back.

To me, this sounds great! I was quite thrilled when I read about this on the website of the Episcopal News Service. But I was not at all thrilled when I made it to the Comments section at the bottom. There were a lot of comments and most of them were quite negative. I am still amazed by the amounts of mistrust and vitriol and small-mindedness expressed there, as many lodged their objections to this proposal of Full Communion.

What is the primary objection, you may wonder? It is difficult to say with any precision, but it seems clear that most of the objections come from a place of fear.

Fear of some kind of forced merger. Fear that we Episcopalians would lose our liturgy and be forced to worship and act as United Methodists do.

Fear that we would lose the things that we value most about our particular way of being disciples.

Now, let's step back for a minute and consider the basic forces that bring people together and that push people apart.

I want you to consider one particular area of conflict – either in your family, in your neighborhood, in our state, in our nation, or somewhere on our planet.

Can you do it? Do you have a conflict in mind?

If you dig down to the roots – if you peel the onion all the way – pick your favorite metaphor – if you get to the heart of the problem, what do you find?

Fear of losing control.

In fact, I will be bold enough to say that every conflict experienced by humans comes from this instinctive compulsion to be in control.

We love to be in control! This is the universal compulsion that drives human nature. AND that drives people apart, because sharing control is a challenging thing to do.

What is the antidote? What can break this compulsive need to be in control?

I am convinced that the perfect and complete antidote is found in the way of Jesus.

The great theologian Leonardo Boff explained it this way: “Only a human community of brothers and sisters built on relationships of communion and participation can be a living symbol of the eternal Trinity” (Trinity and Society, Orbis Books, 1988, p.22).

When real, ordinary people can trust in God alone for their life and their future, then they are free of the need to control things!

In fact, I think some ordinary folks like you and me need to practice a bit. So please repeat after me: “I AM NOT IN CONTROL.”

Can you do that? Whenever you find yourself in conflict, remind yourself of reality by saying it – over and over again if needed – “I am not in control.”

This is what our lesson today from First Peter tells us about martyrs who display the glory of God. What did we hear there?

“If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you” (1 Peter 4:14).

Of course the Spirit of glory is the spirit of God! Those who stand firm in the face of persecution show that they have let go of the need to be in control, that they can trust in God even in the face of violence, because the Spirit of God is within them!

Sadly, as we have seen this week in Egypt, the fellowship of the martyrs continues to grow. May God grant rest eternal to the Martyrs of Minya.

Here is the question for all of us: in whatever conflict that we find ourselves, can we let go of our compulsive need to be in control? Can we allow the Spirit of glory to fill us and guide us into unity?

Remember: we see the glory of God when we see unity among people.

In our families, in our neighborhoods, in our churches, in our nation, in the world, we have a special calling to manifest the glory of God by serving as a force that brings people together – separate and distinct, yet working and moving together in harmony and unity.

And as the Lord prayed, let it be our prayer as well: Holy Father, protect your people who bear the name of Christ, that we may all be one, as you are one, and so let us manifest your glory in the world. Let it be so. Amen.