

“Moving Forward as One”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
May 21, 2023 - Seventh Sunday of Easter

[Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11](#)

Once upon a time, three friends were on a boat in the middle of the ocean. Although they were only on a three-hour tour, they were -- somehow -- far, far away from the harbor from which they set out when they ran into trouble and their boat sank. Fortunately for the three friends, they were able to swim to a small, desert island that was nearby. After languishing on the island for some time without receiving any sign that they would be rescued, and days turned into months, which turned into years of living as castaways, they began to lose hope that they would ever leave. But then one day a corked bottle washed up on the shore, and when the three friends removed the cork, a genie miraculously appeared, flying out of the just-opened bottle. To thank the three friends for setting her free from her bottle-prison, the genie offered each of the three friends one wish. The first castaway, who longed to be back in civilization, wished to have and go to the fanciest brownstone home on Boston’s Commonwealth Avenue. Poof! Just like that, the first castaway’s wish was granted, and he disappeared from the island immediately. The second castaway, also hoping to return to civilization, but who had grown tired of living so closely to others after spending so much time on the desert island with his friends, wished to have and go to the most luxurious chalet outside of Aspen, Colorado. Poof! Immediately, the second friend vanished, going to his new, opulent mountain home. The third castaway sad down in the sand and began to weep. The genie asked, “Dear friend, why do you weep? You can have anything you wish for right now!” The third castaway, with tears still in his eyes, told the genie, “My friends are now gone and I miss them terribly. I wish they would come back!” Poof! The third wish was granted, and, just like that, the genie vanished. Needless to say, the three friends, reunited but alone again on their desert island, *did not* live happily ever after.

If you were granted just one wish, what would it be? Perhaps you’d wish for world peace, or for health for loved ones, or perhaps you’d wish to have some material comfort such as a mountain chalet or seaside mansion. Or maybe you

would wish to have unlimited wishes that you could then use to fix all the world's problems, take care of your family and friends, and create a life of comfort and ease for yourself.

We just heard in today's gospel lesson, the last of a series of Easter season readings from John, Jesus praying for his disciples. This prayer was offered at the conclusion of the very long Farewell Discourse that Jesus gave to his disciples during their Last Supper together, and during the prayer, Jesus asked the One he called Father for what he desired most, to grant this one wish: That the disciples would be one. He could have prayed for them to become wealthy or powerful, or to live lives free from injustice or suffering, or to have perfectly orthodox beliefs or to have masterful knowledge of their scriptures, or to have stadium-sized churches filled with people or smaller meetinghouses in the middle of each town in which the pews were full each Sunday, but that wasn't his one desire. He longed, instead, above all, for them to be one.

The first disciples, though, and the later community of disciples that were the first to receive John's gospel, were less likely, considering the great difficulties they faced, to wish above all things for unity. I imagine that they were more likely to wish, as we heard in our first reading from Acts, for the kingdom of Israel to be restored, meaning they longed for Christ to establish a new, physical earthly empire, over which he would reign as King and they would have power as the King's highest officers. This is what the disciples hoped their Messiah would do, but this wish for power over people, was never granted. Instead, Jesus promised that they would be empowered, indeed, by God's Spirit, but not to rule over people, but to be witnesses of God's love to their fellow Jews in Jerusalem, to their disliked Samaritan neighbors, to the Gentile masses living under Roman rule, and to all people of all kinds in all places in the world. And they were to witness, wherever they went, to God's love and God's life in them, by their love for one another demonstrated in their unity.

We know, too well though, that unity has not yet been realized in Christ's church as it has marched through the ages. Too often, we have struggled to become one, have not even bothered to try, or have actively split apart from one another because of our differences. While we are indeed diverse, I believe that God still desires for us to be united.

But unity is not uniformity. Our differences are many and they are real, and we should find ways to live in peace with one another in our different congregations and traditions and within our own little family of faith, rather than seeing to gain power over one another and to coerce others to see things our way or to worship our way. We are called to be unified though we are diverse, to be a unified rainbow of several distinct colors, or if you look more closely, with many millions of different shades of color.

We are also called to call out behaviors that harm unity or work to stamp out one shade of color that some fail to see as beautiful. This is why we serve as witnesses to God's love for all people and should speak out against movements like Christian Nationalism, which seeks to elevate one minority religious group and impose their values and preferred laws on all other people. This is why we must always use whatever power we do have to lift up the lowly and vulnerable in our midst, such as our transgender youth, when we see their dignity under attack -- as it is throughout our country. This is why we work to create a more just world for all people, no matter who they are, whom they love, or where they are on life's journey.

This is what it looks like to become one. This is what Jesus prayed for. This is what Christ still wishes for us. May we become one, and may we move forward as one, ever working to see the dream of Christ come closer to being realized that the world would be filled with more of God's love and God's life. Amen.