

[Acts 16:16-34](#)
[Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21](#)
[John 17:20-26](#)

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger
St. Peter's, Glenside
7 Easter, Year C, May 29

Upper Room Sunday

"O God ... Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us..." Amen

My heart today feels almost too heavy to bear. Are you feeling this way too?

Because we carry with us into this worship service the 21 lives, including 18 children and two teachers, that were lost in the school shooting in Texas this week. And we carry with us the lives of the 10 Black shoppers taken by a White Supremacist gunman in Buffalo. [Two weeks and 1700 miles apart](#). This is a pain that flows from one end of our country to another, reflecting an addiction to violence and the means of violence that fills that span as well. It encompasses us all.

So we bring that pain to church with us, as we should. And we bring the questions that are weighing on our hearts as well. What are we to do about this? Is the one I hear a lot. God, what are you doing about this? That's a prayer that also lodges deeply within us. And why? Why, why, why does nothing change?

All of this is at least what I bring to Christ's table today. That's my offering. It isn't pretty.

So what is the Spirit saying to the church, in reply?

Well our Gospel from John continues that advice that Jesus gave his followers at the last supper, where he repeatedly enjoins them to stick together, that help is coming. In the passage we have today Jesus tells them to be One, the way that Jesus and his Abba are one.

This advice comes at a very particular stretch in the church's journey from Easter to Pentecost. It started this past Thursday, Ascension Day. This year, with all the rough news, Jesus slipped quietly away into the Heavens. I barely noticed, and I'm a priest.

So our worship today sits between the Ascension and Pentecost – we should call it Upper Room Sunday – this period of time when Jesus asks us to wait ... for help to arrive. You know what his disciples filled that time with? Thoughts and prayers. But real ones – the kind that hurt almost more than they comfort.

We talked about this in our Easter Conversations that we held recently. We discussed how to be in this upper room, this in-between time when we are actively grieving losses, when the new normal seems to entail wave after wave of upset. We saw it as a time to name what's real, to listen deeply to a story that was both shared and diverse, depending on who was talking. We saw it as a time to get some perspective as we wait for the next clear thing to do or to be.

Upper Room Sunday. Maybe we should also call it Cold Comfort Sunday. I bet there were people in that room saying why are we just sitting around here doing nothing but praying? What are we waiting for exactly? And maybe they left and didn't come back, and maybe they missed Pentecost entirely. I don't know for sure. I know that that can be a temptation.

But in our Gospel today Jesus tells us what to do in the meantime, between the Kingdom that we are working towards and the Kingdom that comes, in times that can be marked by grave loss and disillusionment, when the temptations toward despair and resentment and blame are also snapping at our heels

Jesus says Be One.

And by that I don't think he meant be a little huddled group that competes with the rest of the little huddled groups for members, and that tosses out anyone who doesn't think or pray like the rest. I think he is saying that part of your doing has got to include being. Being One. And that requires developing a practice of right relationship, of being aggressively loving in a system that will be impacted by your very presence.

To be one as Jesus is describing it is not to be alone, or isolated. To be one is to be hugely connected. To be one as Jesus and his Abba are one -- we might say as the Trinity is One -- is to be connected in divine relationship with God and with all that God has brought into the world -- with one another in its broadest sense.

The practice of being one requires an untold amount of doing. It is the doing of relationship -- which should be understood as ongoing processes that aim to transform rather than time-limited projects that attempt to fix.

And sometimes the effort looks like nothing is happening at all.

Years ago I attended a conference held by Pax Christi USA, the international peace organization. The organizers had built a super-huge, apothecary scale on the stage. One side of the scale was weighed down with heavy rocks and stones. That was the injustice side, the side of violence. The other side -- the justice and peace side -- was also filled with stones, but they weren't heavy enough to budge the other side. We attendees were invited to bring stones with us to put on the peace and justice side of the scale -- signifying all that we were doing to foster justice. There were hundreds of us. We kept putting more stones onto the justice side day after day and nothing would happen.

For a metaphor it was a little depressing. It looked like none of our efforts made any difference. Until the final liturgy, when the bishop who was presiding, announced "this is Jesus", and added one last stone to the justice side of the scale and the whole thing tipped right in front of our eyes. I can tell you that was one carefully crafted metaphor -- as any physics teacher in this room would know. But it brought the point home beautifully.

What I took home with me was not the moment of the tip from injustice to justice, because that seems to swing back and forth all the time. I couldn't get out of my mind what was actually happening on the peace and justice side of the scale when it didn't move after we added a new stone to it -- and how invisible to me were the forces that were actually at play. If we concluded at any given moment that nothing was happening, based on way the scales were balanced, we might just stop adding anything to the other side of the scale. We might despair when we didn't know how close we were.

Part of waiting for the world to change involves working for the world to change. When Jesus asks us to be One, I believe he is asking us to keep expanding and strengthening the loving relationships that tip the scale.

And what is on the other side of that scale, which seems so weighed down with violence and racism and death right now. The willful inaction of many elected officials is definitely there, and the greed of the rich who fund them, certainly. And those are big obstacles.

[An article](#) quoting James Densley of The Violence Project, which studies gun violence, mass shootings and violent extremism, reminded me that these killings were done at the hands of 18-year old boys.

"Usually what's motivating these shootings is an element of self-hatred, hopelessness, despair, anger, that's turned outward to the world," said Densley. He pointed out that 18 is a very fragile age that can be marked by mental health crisis and depression. In many places, it's also the age where one can buy their choice of weapons.

Self-hatred, hopelessness, despair, anger – those are conditions that can easily be manipulated by polarizing political speech and economic greed. But they can also be swayed by persistent, loving relationships.

When Jesus says wait for the helper to come, he is promising us that the Holy Spirit is the force that keeps us in those relationships, as hard as they might be.

We do not come here on this Upper Room Sunday to plead with God to bring justice to our shattered world. We do not have to coax God into doing the right thing. God is already praying that prayer back to us, and offering us the power to answer it with our lives. That makes me wonder if Jesus' last supper prayer in John's Gospel wasn't aimed at the Father but was really directed at his followers and at us.

"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."

When we walk back into the new normal filled with the Love with which the Father loves the Son, essentially filled with the Holy Spirit, the world changes. It might not be ours to see from one moment to the next, but it is ours to envision and to believe in. This is God's prayer for us. And to that prayer, I say: Amen.