

Easter 7, Year A
How Many People Fit in the Number One?

Even though Ascension Day was actually Thursday, we celebrate it today, when we're all here. After today's first reading, I'm tempted to spend the time this morning just looking into the Heavens with Jesus' followers and longing for Christ's return. But we've been instructed to look elsewhere for now. So my attention is drawn to today's Gospel from John, and a different kind of longing.

Jesus' longing for us.

In John's Gospel there is no ascension story. But there is a really, really long prayer that Jesus leaves his followers with before his arrest in the garden. It's a prayer for his current and future followers, which makes it also a prayer for us.

In it, Jesus' great desire for us is this: that we may be One as Jesus and his Father are One.

Which makes me wonder, who is Jesus really talking about here? How many people actually fit into the number One, into Jesus' idea of oneness? Are we just talking about Christians here? Or does Jesus have something much, much bigger, much more -- shall we say universal -- in mind?

When Jesus talks about his own oneness with God, he speaks of a dynamic interdependence -- a mutual sharing and self-giving. All that the Father has is his; all that he has is the Father's.

I try to imagine that kind of oneness that Jesus suggests and it boggles my mind. How can people, who are very handy at division and exclusion, who thrive on competition, ever manage a love like that? How in fact are we to imagine such a oneness in our country today, when we are being ever divided, differentiated, detained and deported, when our very diversity is under attack?

At the same time, it occurs to me that God may just have created us for this very thing.

I say that because one thing that goes along with being human is being connected to other people. Our genius is in creating systems that require interdependence. And often we do this without even realizing that that is what we are creating.

Now while we have a lot invested in myths about being self-made individuals who are in control of our own destiny, we might as well face facts. There is not one thing that we own or use or eat or do that does not in some way include the participation of another person. We are inextricably bound.

If you don't believe me look at your shoes.

I'm going to assume that you did not make them from scratch. So I want you to consider for a moment all the people who are connected to the pair of shoes on your feet right now.

Consider all the hands that touched them – that designed them, cut the pieces for them, mixed the dye, tended the animals that provided the leather or the people who offered the labor for the “man made parts.” Consider who worked the machines that stitched and assembled these shoes. Consider the hands that packed them, stuffed the little tissue wads in the toes, that designed and assembled the boxes and, who shipped them, who stocked them, who sold them to you. I'm sure I'm missing a few.

Imagine a fine filament connecting your pair of shoes to each person who had something to do with the fact that they are on your feet and consider the vast web you walk on. Consider all the places throughout the globe that your shoes walked before they made it to your feet. That is the kind of connection I'm talking about.

I think it is safe to say that there has been no other time in history when we have been more connected to more people spanning vast distances across our globe than we are now. And that of course touches every part of our lives, not just our shoes.

But obviously we know that that level of connection is not the same as oneness. Those imaginary filaments extending from your feet into the world are not relationships of loving mutuality. We will not be sending the people on the other end little thank you notes, or having them all over for dinner to celebrate the brilliant work of their shoe-making. Rather, we are content to allow them to be invisible, to imagine we live in a much tinier world full of people that we know and recognize.

On our own steam, we might be able to shoot for oneness on a really small scale – as a family unit, or a group of sports fans or a maybe a church. On this scale we could imagine filling the Number One with people who believe the same things, or look alike, or have the same heritage or gender identity or the same economic status. That's why when people attempt to make themselves Number One including those just like them, they are using a really small number with very little room inside.

And that's not the oneness that Jesus is talking about.

What Jesus is talking about is a One that is outside of our math ability, that falls completely in the domain of the Master of the Universe. And this is what God longs to include us in.

That we may be One as God is One.

And that got me thinking. What if God's idea of making us One as God is One, relies on using all the connections that we humans are so brilliant at making?

Returning to all those people who are attached just to our shoes, what if we allowed God's love to animate, even shorten, every strand of human connection that touched our feet today – what if we allowed the full force of the Trinity to travel through us and along those lines with the intention that lives be transformed, that wounds be healed, that oppression be undone, that families be united and blessed, that children grow in wholeness, that opportunities be realized, that lives be sustained?

Essentially what would happen if we allowed God to make all that we are connected to visible, beloved and holy? That we all might be One in the dynamic, mutual, world-creating Love of God – just as God is One?

Impossible? We are able to connect a single pair shoes to people across the world, but we can't connect our hearts?

If we find ourselves scanning the Ascension skies or praying in our upper rooms for the grace to do this, it might be helpful to remember that Jesus promised to send help. The Holy Spirit that we celebrate next week on Pentecost turns the individual followers of Jesus into a united body that immediately hits the streets with the promise of a loving God that is on the move.

That same Holy Spirit is also God's prayer to us: Will you be one as I AM? Will you open yourself to my love in such a way that it might transform you and all you are connected to?

This is God's prayer to us as individuals, as we wrestle with the myth that we are individual, separate competitors in the human race.

And it's God's prayer to us as church, as we gather in so many different rooms, splintered by ideology and prejudice and theological difference.

Are you willing to be One as I am One?

It is ultimately our prayer to answer. Yes or No. Open or Shut. One or Zero.

Amen.