

The Whole World Is Watching

A Sermon for Every Sunday, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year C (2019)

John 17:20-26

Imagine that you are sitting in a darkened movie theater, eating popcorn. You have already seen three previews of coming attractions and now it is time for the feature presentation. The screen goes black, and from the speakers you begin to hear the sounds of a meal in progress--the clink of utensils, the murmur of conversation--and as the picture swims up out of the darkness you see men in robes reclining around a collection of greasy plates, bowls, pitchers, cups, some of them still eating, reaching out with a piece of bread to sop up the last bit of gravy. "Jerusalem, A. D. 33," announces the subtitle as the camera slowly zooms in on the solemn face of a man who takes a long look at each of the others before turning his eyes toward heaven

"Holy Father," he sighs, "I pray that they might be one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." And then, closing his eyes, clenching his fists, he prays with urgency, "Let them be one, Father, let them be ONE!" And the camera tilts up crazily from his face into a sky full of swirling stars as the title score swells in the background and the name of the film appears on the screen. As the opening credits roll, the whole history of the church unfolds in a kaleidoscope of images, tumbling down through the centuries, until the director's name fades from the screen, the music dies, and you hear the steady buzz of a modern convention hall.

"Let me have your attention, please," says a round-faced man at the podium, and as he bangs his gavel we learn that this is "Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1999." The convention hall gets quiet. "Let me welcome you to this international, interdenominational gathering of Christians," he says with a smile. "As you know, our

purpose in these three days is to find some common ground, to draft a confession of faith for the year 2000 with which we all can agree," adding with a chuckle, "impossible as that sounds. We'll do it like this: Each of you should have received a large card, red on one side, green on the other. As I read the following statements and ask for a vote, show me the green side if you agree, the red side if you don't. And then we'll go on to the next statement. All right? Fine. The first statement from our panel is this one: 'Jesus was born of a virgin.' Remember, green side if you agree. Red side if you don't."

The camera slowly pans a sea of red and green cards, just about evenly divided. The moderator chuckles again, nervously. "See what I mean?" he says. "It looks like a tie. Let's go on to the next statement and see if we can do any better."

But before he can say another word an argument breaks out on the convention floor. News cameras converge on the scene as one of the delegates shouts at another, "If you don't believe Jesus was born of a virgin then you don't belong in this meeting!" grabbing the other man's card and sailing it across the room like a Frisbee. And then it's bedlam, everybody reaching, snatching cards, throwing punches. The moderator ducks behind the podium as red and green cards rain down on the platform. Flashbulbs pop like fireworks.

The next morning's *Milwaukee Sentinel* carries this headline: "Christian Convention Erupts in Violence: Delegates Disagree on Virgin Birth." And a truck driver from St. Paul points to the picture as a waitress fills his coffee cup. "Willya look at that? Ain't that the biggest crock you've ever seen? And my mother-in-law wonders why I don't go to church!"

The truth of the matter is this: the church is sadly fragmented. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Christian denominations in the world, divided along the hair-thin lines of doctrinal difference. The prayer Jesus offered up nearly two thousand years ago has *not* been answered. We are not "all one." And if you pay attention to his words you can see what a problem we have. "Holy Father," he said, "I pray that they may all be one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" If we don't show some unity, then the world *won't* believe. But is there any point on which we can agree?

Three days later in Milwaukee the convention hall is in a shambles. Folding chairs are overturned, trash fills the aisles. The delegates are looking sullen, many of them with bandaged heads, arms in slings. The moderator steps cautiously to the podium and announces in a tired voice, "We will close our, um . . . , meeting with communion. Ushers will pass the elements from the aisle." And as the plates travel down the rows, from white to black to yellow hand, a silence falls on that room. And when everyone is holding both bread and cup a retired minister gets up slowly from his chair, shuffles to the podium, and invokes the ancient formula: "On the night that he was betrayed Jesus took bread, and when he had blessed it he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, broken for you.'" And then he stops, as if he has forgotten what to say next. For several minutes he stands in that deafening silence, staring at the broken loaf in his hands. And then, from somewhere in front of him, a young woman whispers in awe, "The body of Christ was broken for me." The man beside her hears it, whispers it too: "The body of Christ was

broken for me." And then it ripples across the congregation like a breeze, until every voice in that room is whispering in unison: "The body of Christ was broken for *us!*"

The sound is like the rush of a mighty wind.

The next day's newspaper carries a single paragraph on Page 5 under the headline: "Christian Gathering Ends in Unity." And in the last scene of the movie the waitress is pointing it out with a glossy red fingernail. "Well," says the trucker in surprise, almost spilling his coffee,

"Whattya know about that?!"