

1 John 3:16-24

The Fourth Sunday in Easter / Earth Sunday

April 21, 2024

Time for a pop quiz. Does anyone happen to know the motto of the United Church of Canada? It's printed on the crest.

Ut Omnes Unum Sint means that "that they all may be one." In John 17:21, Jesus prays that just as he and the Father are one, his followers may be made one in them as well.

The First Letter of John is written from and to the same community that produced the Gospel According to John: a community that is decidedly *not* of one heart and mind. Some early Christians are denying the unity of God and humanity in Jesus. In today's more secular age, many would agree, saying that there was nothing divine about Jesus: that he was simply another human being.

But those early Christians, steeped in Greek ideas, came at it from the opposite direction. The *Logos* – the creative Word of God – was thought to be pure Spirit, and superior to the messy business of flesh and blood. So, while the Spirit of God might have been active in Jesus and might even have deigned to dwell in him during his lifetime, it abandoned him before his crucifixion. The living Jesus might have been the Christ, the chosen of God, but he died an ordinary human being.

Not only is that a depressing thought about Jesus' last hours; it also means that nothing of God died on the cross. God did not sacrifice anything of Herself on the cross; God's love of and identification with us has limits. Therefore, if we follow the commandment to love each other as God has loved us, the model for our love is a pretty shallow love that leaves when the going gets tough.¹

This is not the Gospel. The core of John's Gospel is the identification of Jesus with God and thus God with humanity. It should lead to mutual love because all of us are one in God. Failure to love is failure to believe in – to trust – Jesus. So theology and action reinforce each other, for good or for ill. As a result of this failure of love and trust, although they are happy to *talk* of love, when theological disputes arise John's community quickly splits – rather than doing the tough work of talking it out. Mutual love and care are no longer in evidence. Those who are left behind after the schism lack the certainty and conviction to live out their discipleship. The writer speaks of “our hearts condemn[ing] us.”

On this Earth Sunday, we also stand accused by our own consciences, uncertain of how to respond in the face of environmental destruction.

On August 4, 2014, the dam at Mount Polley Mine broke and dumped 26 billion litres of contaminated water into Quesnel Lake, one of the world's deepest freshwater

¹ David L. Bartlett, “1 John 3:16-24: Exegetical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 445.

lakes, birthplace of salmon, and an important tributary of the Fraser River. The traditional territory and communities of the local First Nations was devastated, and four years later there was still no accountability or justice for the disaster.²

Two years later, an indigenous woman in Honduras, Berta Caceres, was shot because she was leading efforts to oppose a mega-dam that would likewise endanger the food and drinking water of communities along the sacred Gualcarque River.³

People need resources and people need jobs. But people also need food and water and a sense of belonging to the land and water. These needs fall out of balance when we fail to see the unity of the human and divine in Jesus, which implies the unity of the human and divine in all of us. When I can't see God in Christ in you, I'm more willing to view your well-being as irrelevant or even an obstacle to getting what I want. The indigenous people of BC, or Honduras, are reduced from human beings to be honoured, to inconveniences to be ignored or removed. When we can't see the presence of God in the natural world, then we can't see ourselves as part of the natural world, and it likewise becomes merely a means to an end, and its protection, an obstacle to meeting our needs.

Once again, bad theology leads to our uncertainty, helplessness, and paralysis when we need instead to be taking action.

2 "In Truth and Action: A Service for Earth Day," The United Church of Canada, 2018, <https://united-church.ca/worship-special-days/earth-sunday>.

3 "In Truth and Action."

That is why our writer begins, first, with teaching his audience – or, rather, reminding them. “We know love by this,” he says, “that he laid down his life for us.” We’re not getting into the details here – no discussion of blood sacrifice for our sins – but just noting that the Jesus who died in solidarity with us was also the presence of God. Because God abided in him, he was able to trust God and live his life for us. Meditating on this truth of the loving presence of God in Christ then strengthens us to likewise trust the love of God, and find the strength *in* God to show love and care for the welfare of our siblings in Christ. When we learn, we pray, and when we pray, we act. Pope Francis said, “You pray for the hungry, then you feed them. That’s how prayer works.” As I said last week, God has already acted in Christ. Through our prayers, we align ourselves in action with what God is already doing.

On this Earth Sunday, we also need to remind ourselves of the teaching at the beginning of John’s Gospel, which says,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.⁴

4 John 1:1-4, *New Revised Standard Version*.

The divine creative power brought us and all that lives into being, and this divine power dwells within us as shown in Jesus. We are thus doubly related to all humanity and to all creation: we are all created, and we all share in the creator.

I invite you, then, to take a few minutes with the pens and the paper you were given. Ask yourself: what might I need to learn – about God’s world, about God Word in scripture, or about the conditions of my human siblings – in order to pray? And about what should I pray, so that I am strengthened and enabled to act? What might acting in love look like? We are not called to do more than we can, but in reflecting on how the creative Word meets us in our situations, we can discern the role we might be called to play.