

Oneness is a Working Progress. A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Alan Lai

Often, I have mixed feelings when it comes to the reading of John 17 in the advent of the Pentecost season. For one thing, the people who organize the lectionary want to give us texts that help us meditate on the ‘final’ departure of Jesus. But John 17 is Jesus’ prayer before his crucifixion! That was a ‘different’ type of leaving. When those words were said, Jesus’ disciples had no expectation that Jesus would die and resurrect. If Jesus were gone for good without Easter Sunday, these disciples would have no motivation to continue Jesus’ teachings. That was not the case for Pentecost.

To say that this is Jesus’ prayer, that is to say he is not speaking to us, but to God. Jesus understands the source of his strength, that is God; who is able to uphold us in times of trouble. In this prayer, Jesus prayed that their disciples would be one. Oneness? What kind of challenge would Jesus’ disciples face? I think of Peter’s personality. Jesus’ disciples once debated who is the greatest among them. Thomas doubted Mary’s testimony that Jesus was resurrected. I also think of Mary Magdalene who anointed Jesus with an expensive jar of perfume, which caused an uproar. If not because Jesus were among them and was able say a few words to calm them down, these disciples may have gone separate ways long time ago! How could these diverse personalities stick together when Jesus was not around?

But there is something more. John 17 is a typical Jewish leaders’ prayer when it comes to the end of their lives or ministry. Jesus’ mention of the ‘hour has come’ is a way to say how he reveals God’s divine presence and power. His prayer for his disciples was his essential act by making the name of God known. Some scholars point out 17:6 is both pastoral and polemical: *“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.”*

At a time when Jesus’ followers were banned from attending traditional synagogue, Jesus assured them they were truly Jewish, following the divine name of God. Despite differences, the ‘oneness’ Jesus addresses here means they are related intimately with one another and share unity of purpose. Although some did not see Jesus as the Messiah, they share the same purpose in life; that is to honour and glorify God.

Fast forward to our context, oneness is a concept we easily agree on, but it is very difficult to live out. Diverse opinions, lifestyles, religions, and practices exist even within the same cultural groups. It would take skill and commitment to navigate difference across diverse cultural and religious groups. Chinese cultures emphasize harmony and togetherness. Is harmony an expression of oneness? Sometimes it is; sometimes it is not. I think oneness contains elements of harmony; but harmony itself doesn’t necessarily

provide long lasting togetherness. Sometimes during the course of pursuing oneness, some minority voices are not heard. How a community who commits to honour the Creator provides safe and respectful spaces matters.

A final thought, our pursuit of communal oneness or unity cannot neglect how power is allocated. The word “power” may sound sensitive; yet, there are no human communities that don’t ever face the issue of power. Issues like: Who can speak? When can they speak? Who has spoken more? Who hasn’t spoken? Why don’t they speak? How safe it is to speak? These are important questions. To pursue oneness, I have to begin by understanding who I am and what has shaped me. Have I done some hard work on unpacking my own assumptions, and understanding my desire? Why do I desire that? Do I have the mindset of seeking alternative voices? Oneness is always a working progress.

As we approach summertime, it will be a transitional time for both our spiritual and social lives, especially this year. We have passed the first test, that is, we have survived not being able to come to worship in the building for 3 months and more, dine out at our favourite restaurants, see our favourite sports teams on TV, etc. I found out I can live without sports channels! Slowly, step by step, we will go back to the church building; a full return will most likely happen in late August or even September.

But this unexpected hiatus will change the way we see and do many things. By then we will enter a second test; that is how well we adjust to the new reality because a degree of preventive measures will still be in place until a vaccine is found. On top of everything, we need to restart and re-acquaintance, we haven’t forgotten our task, that is to figure out the future of the South Arm United Church. Having said all that, this experience is valuable to test our collective wisdom. I believe we can come out stronger and more united in figuring out future missions as Jesus’ followers in *this* time, in *this* building, and in *this* geographical location. Jesus has prayed for us. The Holy Spirit is among us. Let us be hopeful.