

*The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

May 20th, 2007

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

*That We All May be One
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector*

Jerry Fallwell, may his soul rest in peace, passed away this week. . . and probably many of you glimpsed a tiny portion of the final firestorm of publicity about him, sort of an epitaph writ large all over the media across the country, if not the world.

Most if not all of us recognize his name: his was one of the first that sprang to mind the past few decades when anyone uttered the words “evangelical” or “fundamentalist.” His was one of several prominent faces given to a religious movement that immeasurably changed the nature of politics in our country, and around which a small constellation of hot-button issues revolved.

I grew up in Bible-belt country in the heyday of Jerry Fallwell and other evangelicals, Reaganomics, the rise of the Religious Right and the self-described Moral Majority – the great religious-political forces that shaped in so many ways the latter decades of the twentieth century. Even in high school, I remember the rifts that would form amongst friends in casual conversation over the issues of the day: abortion laws, creationism, evolution, human sexuality. Some of these have stuck to me like Velcro. They shaped the woof and warp of how I see the world. They still hit my heart and mind in strange and unexpected ways.

Hot buttons run deep, don't they? They cause people to open their wallets, leave or enter churches, and run in droves to the polls in election years. They strain friendships and uncover fault-lines in otherwise loving communities, families, and relationships.

Over the past thirty years, rightly or wrongly or indifferently, we have done what human beings always have done. We have cast lines in the sand, scapegoated one another, made others if not ourselves into two dimensional caricatures, set up the straw people to knock down and feel good about our own personal or communal forms of Christianity. We've done it as evangelicals, as progressives, as conservatives, as activists, as hardliners, liberals, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics. . . I needn't go on. You all know the labels that have been well-worn. Most of us have at least tried them on at one time or another, for good and for ill.

I was caught up this past Friday in an ironic moment as I attended commencement at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley. Coming to the platform for an honorary doctorate was our previous Presiding Bishop, Frank Griswold, who had lived in the center of the present storm we call the Anglican Communion. Another receiving an honorary doctorate was a good friend and mentor, Fred Vergara, who now heads up the ethnic ministry desks for the national Church. Also coming to the platform for a Master's degree was a student from the Church of

Nigeria, one of the churches now on the brink of schism with The Episcopal Church. There was the divine irony was in all of its wonder, sharing together one bread and one cup.

On the way over I had been listening to the radio. Now, like most good Episcopalians who wear or get tarred with the tattered label, “liberal” and “progressive,” my dial was tuned to NPR. On KQED was an interview with some younger self-described evangelicals. Not exactly your regular group of talking heads on Forum!

They were talking of moving the political arm of the evangelical movement away from single hot-button issues, litmus test platforms, and towards effective, cooperative relationships: Relationships that transcend the partisan and religious boundaries now so terribly scarred and littered with bodies. To begin working with other churches, Christians, folk of various spiritualities and faith traditions, and even with those with no declared faith on tackling the major moral issues of our day: poverty, the health and well-being of our children, looming environmental issues. To find something in common to work on these challenges and more. Something in common with historic enemies: progressives, and others outside the evangelical sphere of influence. To follow that road to the higher ground that is the common ground of our lives, communities, and shared human interests.

If these are evangelicals, then I suppose I might count myself as one. How about you? But then I also remember when I used to curl up my toes at the “e” word and smugly dismiss a good portion of the Christians in the country for peddling things that seemed simply awful to me. The most blood-boiling words of talking heads on Christian television and over the airwaves would eclipse even the diversity within the evangelical movement itself. Names like Jim Wallis, and even historical folk so many of us love, like Martin Luther King, seemed lost in the seething marriage of politics and a peculiar brand of late 20th-century American Christianity.

The world is so much more complicated than the labels we wear or place on others, isn't it?

Something wonderful seems to be breaking right now into Christianity. Perhaps it always has been, and so many of us forgot to look for it over the past few decades. And it is not that our disagreements are coming to an end, but perhaps that the partisan warfare is starting to wind down in many quarters. The rhetoric of our late great schism in the Anglican Communion is even starting to ring a little hollow, to sound a bit dated. It's starting to feel like an old church fight where many people couldn't remember why the fight began, and even less why it should continue.

And it is into this that we hear Good News spoken today in our readings.

Jesus is Risen and Ascended that our old, war-torn and ragged labels – the ones that divide us as Christians, as people, as citizens, as human beings, as Creatures of God – that all those cease to have power over us. And as we turn to Jesus' great prayer in today's gospel, we hear of Christ's desire that we might all be one. Followers of Christ first, before we are defined and risk being consumed by our partisan, political, and religious labels.

Jesus' great prayer that we all may be one is not just Christian pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking. It's a statement of how things truly are. Of how the universe in all its fecund diversity is one, of how all things are inter-related from the farthest star to the wood of your pew to the blood coursing through our veins. Of how we are all one, made of the same stuff, breathing the same air, drinking out of the same wellspring of life of the same planet, the same earth, returning together to the dust, and born together on the wings of God's abundant love – even as we believe for all eternity.

We are bound together by the great moral challenges we face as communities of God's People: the environmental threats we share, rampant poverty and hunger in so many parts of the world, that gnawing sense that our comfort is at someone else's expense, the plight of the immigrant family in San Rafael, the fights over housing in Mill Valley.

The great evils that divide the world today, us one from the other, and just as much divide our hearts and pit us sometimes even against our true selves made in the image of God – all of those evils rest not in breaking the oneness that is. Rather, they are evil only in that they deny the truth that we are one. And they are everywhere, from the hard words we utter to and against one another, to the cold messages we send ourselves inside that divide our hearts from our minds and our actions from our conscience and our best and most courageous action from our faith.

Jesus prays for an end to all of this, a ceasing of the hostilities that threatens our life both physically and spiritually. Jesus calls for reconciliation with the paradoxes he found in proposing an alternative kind of community against the powers of the world that seek to alienate and destroy all the creatures of God. Powers that are often themselves self-consuming. Jesus' community was about bringing together enemies as friends, the outcasts and the sinners, the hopeless and the wayward, rich and poor.

We are all, no matter what label we wear most days, evangelical, progressive, unsure, conservative, liberal, moderate, male, female, gay, straight, black, white, immigrant, native, post-modern, or simply post-everything. . .we are part of the latest chapter in the long history of this community Jesus founded. This community that is one. Not of uniformity, but of unique people brought together into wholeness with other unique people of God. Made of the same stuff as each other, made in similar yet distinct ways. Yet belonging to each other. Belonging to the world that we seek to transform. Belonging to God to whom all belongs.

Jesus knocks on the doors of each of our hearts as individuals and on the doors that we share, seeking entrance, seeking opening, seeking a way into the places that are divided and broken. Christ bridges the rifts of our souls and relationships with a body broken for us, and a body resurrected and ascended, but ascended only into the great gaps of time and space where we feel heartache and loneliness.

Christ is One. One with us. One with God. That we all may be One. And that is good news for all of us, Episcopalian, evangelical, agnostic, unsure, uncertain, but Christian. And Christian not for ourselves as much as for a world seeking to uncover the truth of its wholeness, the truth that we are one. And in that truth -- living and dynamic, eternal and present to our heart of hearts -- to heal, transform, breathe, and be free. *Amen.*