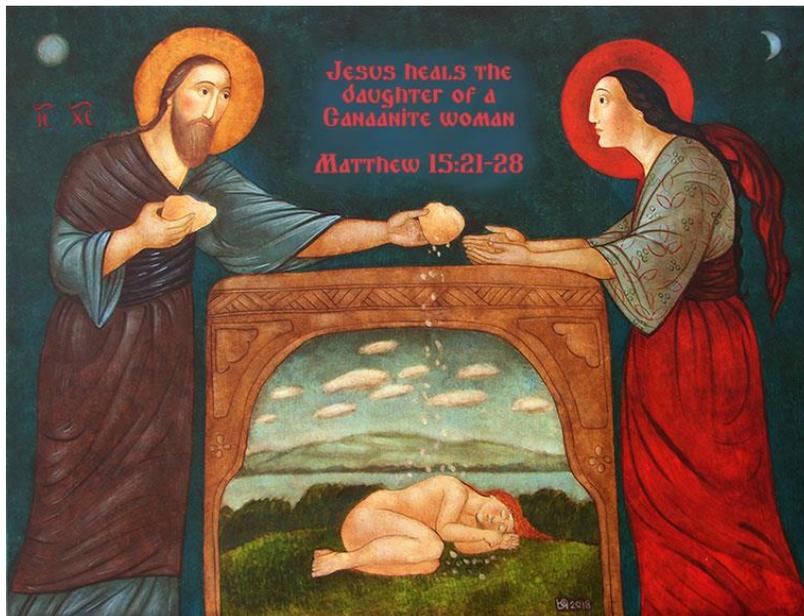


# REFLECTIONS

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on the Eucharistic Lectionary for Proper 15, year A  
Sunday, August 16, 2020

by the Reverend Tom Malioneck, Rector,

## Saint Paul's Church Kinderhook, New York

a missionary outpost of the Episcopal Diocese of Albany

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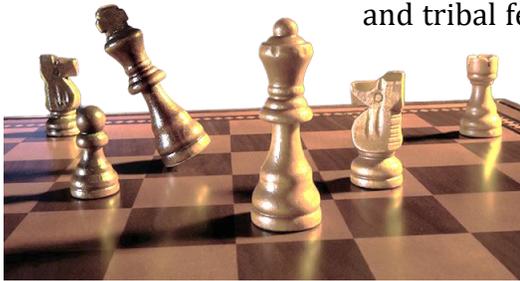
## Oh, how good and delightful it is, when brethren live together in unity! (Psalm 133:1)

As we begin to gather again to worship God together in person, it is a good idea to reflect on “together” — unity. Why is *unity* so important that God would inspire the psalmist to praise it for all of history to remember?

You will find very few examples of real unity in the Bible. Even when things are going well for Israel or for the Church, there are disputes, factions, and, not infrequently, one side or the other is driven off, or merely walks out. Yet God keeps re-uniting and re-conciling. The letters from Paul to specific local churches, and from Peter to all churches, repeatedly admonish and encourage people to get over themselves, to remember why they were chosen and shaped into the church in the first place: to make Jesus Christ known to the world as its only savior and Lord, so that the world may be reconciled to reality — that is, to God — for the sake of the whole cosmos.

Human beings unite over all kinds of things (“Birds of a feather ...”). The problem is that these unities are only *partial*, and therefore temporary; they are not so much principled unity in faith as expedient alliances born of a lack of faith. They unite some, but only into factions. Since they are based on limited, impermanent goals, nothing outside or above them can offer a more lasting, stronger unity than Jesus Christ can, and has, and does, and will.

Like chess pieces, locked into certain moves, we perceive only a few squares because they alone matter to us. Jesus, instead, offers **only one square**, but it is the square that *unites* all others: the whole board. On this one square, pieces are not stuck in predetermined patterns by circumstance. *As long as they remain on the board*, they are free and at peace: no longer combative, no longer obsessed with removing enemies and toppling leaders, getting needs met and desires gratified, personal hopes fulfilled and tribal fears allayed depending on which side, which color, is “ours.” We still



have specific roles to play, depending on the shape of each one’s “piece,”; but any piece can triumph, and all are devoted, now no longer to opposing objectives, but to a common one. On this One Square, we are not divided by self-interest, but united by a common boundary. We are focused, not on what we get but on gladly, gratefully, pledging our whole self to serve God in whatever way will best advance his plan.

The Scripture readings for Mass today treat us to vivid examples of the unifying power of God’s plan. Joseph’s tearful reunion with family members who had treated him cruelly can happen because both he and they recognize that not even sin and adversity thwart God, who uses them to achieve an unimagined, surpassing good (and, as we know, still greater good generations later). Paul pleads passionately with Gentile believers — as he had once also pleaded with his fellow Jews — not to think themselves superior to others. Jesus starts to fulfill the mission God gave to Israel — to draw other peoples, tribes, nations, ethnic groups back into the healing, intimate Lordship of the One and Only True God. We do not, of course, practice, counsel, or condone sin, evil, or catastrophe in the naïve presumption that God will make it all good in the end; but when sin abounds and tragedy strikes, we can endure what we cannot change and look forward to unimaginable redemption.

What of *our* unity here at Saint Paul’s? Will we unite over small things into small factions, only to reach an impasse with other factions, who favor other small things? Will we continue to threaten and walk out on one another over when, where, or how long to worship? Will we “square off” (!) over aesthetics, discipline, piety, style, or political views — let alone authentic Christian morals and doctrine? Will we hold the allegiances and loyalties that give us passing worldly comfort, security, pleasure, power, and prestige so dear and critically important that we begrudge their creator (and his church) time, resources, and commitment if they are not presented to our liking? Will we starve ourselves, leaving others to starve, rather than accept life-giving crumbs shared as graciously as manna? Will we leave the one square of Christ’s unified board? or will

we stay, and also encourage one another to remain on it? Will we, as St. Gregory of Nyssa says, line up behind our favorite idols and argue about which one to serve? — or will we fall to our knees in awestruck wonder that the Lord of the Universe has called us to serve him at all?

These are not new temptations or new sins. But our generation of Christians — a priestly people called to mediate between the people of our day and God — has the chance to repent on their behalf and to bear witness before them to the reconciling triumph of Jesus. We thanked God today for Jesus' example of a godly life. We prayed for grace to follow him. We *can* leave behind the false comfort of predictable lines and colors. We *can* form *one* flock under the *one* and *only* Shepherd. *Therein* lies our unity, our meaning, our joy, our satisfaction, the fulfillment of our purpose in being, our destiny. *Therein* lies our glory. How good and delightful that is!