

Pr. Franklin Wilson
Luther Memorial Church
Acts 16.16-34; Psalm 97
Revelation 22.12-14, 16-17, 20-21; St. John 17. 20-26

“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Seventh Sunday After Easter May 16, 2010

The universe is suffused with divine purpose. Unity, the unity of all things and people in the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. They and us and the world as one. The one in the many, and the many one. As you may know, I’ve only just returned from six days in the place of my birth, among my own people, in the State of Oregon, along the Columbia River—where the last vestiges of the Willamette join the Columbia, at the northern tip of Sauvie Island: Columbia County, 50 miles from the Pacific, 30 miles north of Portland, on the Oregon side, across from the Lewis River with Mt. St. Helens looming to the North. Mt. Hood rises 90 miles to the Southeast with Mt. Adams in between. On a clear day, you can see Jefferson south of Hood, and on a very clear day, Rainier to the far north. It’s a land punctuated by volcanic mountains, rivers, evergreens, and people fleeing tradition, institutional allegiance, society, and all the classic forms of western civilization. You don’t have to look hard to find the 24 hour Church of Elvis; EarthTides Pagan Network, Moonshadow, or the Pagan Society of Portlandia. These and a hundred other “non-religious” religions dot the religious landscape, making the “Freedom From Religion Foundation” look as conventional as the girl-scouts only without cookies.

My brothers and I went home to observe Mother’s Day and the first anniversary of our father’s death. We sorted through Dad’s stuff—boxes of it. Tim got a side-arm; we each got a silver dollar, a butcher’s apron, and a 1964 JFK half dollar. Douglas wanted dad’s turquoise ring; Timothy his favorite belt buckle; Bryan got Dad’s clock, a ring, a skinning knife, a cowhide, and a fleece; Matthew (who’s living in the house) also got a knife as did I, along with a butcher’s steel, a hunting hat and coat, and dad’s camera—which he almost never used. The camera’s disuse appealed to me as a reminder of our father’s passion for things useful, pragmatic, and mechanical. I also got Dad’s wedding ring, an unexpected treasure. But I’m not altogether sure why I treasure it. He hadn’t worn it since 1975; and surely his leaving our mother initiated one of the unhappiest periods of our lives. Still, I’m drawn to the countless memories borne within its golden symmetry, recollections of a life once whole before it blew apart and everything went south.

Our father wore the ring on his left hand from the first day of Spring, 1948 until sometime in 1975. Or perhaps he took it off earlier. It doesn't matter. What matters is that the ring and, really, any ring—but especially a wedding ring—proclaims the possibility of two becoming one—the promise of unity, wholeness, and balance carved out of an unbalanced world. Of course, in my parents' case (as in so many cases) it didn't work out or, perhaps, it only worked for a time and then no more. But, again, that doesn't really matter. What matters is the possibility, the reality to which the thing points—the very things promised in today's Gospel: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Today marks the last Sunday of Easter; the Season is nearly gone. What began with resounding promise a few weeks ago is now about to end. On Easter Eve Nancy Jane, Felix, and Olive were baptized amid the light and shadow of Christ's death and resurrection proclaimed in Word, prayer, and song. Yet, like marriage and life itself, Easter passes away and is soon gone. All that remains is a ring, a candle, a certificate: tokens of something that happened and is no more.

Is baptism any different than a frail wedding, the marriage of two, a unity of opposites that cannot endure and must (whether by death or disagreement) end? Is Christ's incarnation any different than a marriage of human beings—a joining of human flesh for a season—something that begins with joy and invariably ends in sorrow? Can there be eternity in mortal time? In a world of opposites, can there be such a thing as unopposed unity? Can we who are weak and limited and lonely really be made one with the God who is powerful and endless and complete? Can Jesus born of Mary's flesh really unite with the God who is unborn, uncreated, and eternal? If Jesus is one with the Father, and if by Baptism we are one with Jesus, why does my father's ring yet proclaim the disunity of marriage and divorce? If we are one with the Father and the Son, how does such unity manifest itself in a divided and broken world?

I am tempted to speak abstractly. We are inclined to conjure ideas—as though Easter promise and resurrection hope were removed from the mess of marriage, earth, flesh, blood, rocks, dirt, and dust. As though wedding rings were not meant for human hands soaked in blood, toil, sweat, and tears. But, of course, that's precisely what wedding rings *are* for—which is why they don't belong in boxes, stuffed away in drawers gathering dust.

Ideally, I suppose, a wedding ring should be buried on the hand of one who wore it. Not gathering dust in a drawer, but again becoming one with the earth even as the hand that bore it does the same—not gathering dust, but *becoming* dust, like the stuff from which we were made and from which we shall all be raised. The promise of unity, the hope of restoration in the mercy and grace of God, is borne out of the dust of death and, like a wedding ring from a dead marriage, awaits the promise of unity restored.

My brothers and I stood last Saturday in the Yankton Cemetery. Studying the ground beneath our feet, we were once again coming to terms with our father's death—earlier that morning we had met with a mortician trying in vain to choose an appropriate headstone. Since our father's ashes lie in the grave of our youngest brother, we decided to match our brother's 45 year old stone—adding the word “Son” to his marker and then putting “Father” on our Dad's.

From the cemetery, we made our way back to our Father's house and proceeded to divide up his earthly possessions—the wedding ring falling into my hands like a drop of Easter hope, a sign of unity among divided things, the unity of death and life, of things human with things divine—and the promise of life restored; the unity of all things restored in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.