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### **Elusive Daunting Holy Oneness**

By most accounts, the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci is one of the most famous works of art in the world. Painted over the course of three years in the 15<sup>th</sup> century on wall in the dining hall of the monastery in Milan.

The setting of the gospel this morning is a prayer that comes, in John's version, at the very end of that last meal.

A little art history for a Sunday morning – without the benefit of the slides. What one notices at first about the famous painting is how Jesus and the twelve are seated on the same side at a long table. The scene resembles a banquet more than an intimate meal. That may have been the custom of a common meal in Milan at the time – or more likely a very two-dimensional style used at the time -- because more than likely Jesus dined in the Middle Eastern practice of sitting or lounging on the floor on cushions. What we know is that Da Vinci succeeds in making sure no backs are turned – we see all of their faces. That seems to be his goal.

The painting is among the most studied in history. What many have written about is the look on the faces of the twelve when Jesus announced that one of them would betray him. All of them have different reactions – essentially conveying that it could not possibly be them. They look stunned and confused, worried and angry: Philip, James, John, Peter with a knife in his hand, Thomas. Judas, the betrayer, clutching a purse of the coins given to him for his action, recoils. The rest of the disciples, seated in 3's, seem to talk among themselves. Jesus, calm and at peace, in the center.

The extended conversation and prayer at the Last Supper that we hear in today's gospel shows us how Jesus was concerned about his followers. He knew what they did not: that he would soon leave them. He may have known that some of them would suffer the same fate that he would. He may have known that there would be disagreements and conflicts that would arise and he, in person, would not be there to reconcile and heal those differences. Peter and Paul would debate mightily about inclusion and purity. What he could do was what he always did: Jesus led by example. He washed his disciples' feet at the beginning of that meal, showing us the value of serving other over being served yourself.

It is a very human emotion to worry and wonder about what will come next. What will happen after we depart this earth? Will the things we have valued and cherished live on beyond us? Will those who remain after us be OK? Will our children and children's children live in peace and prosper? Will they struggle and face hardship? It is why, living in a material world, clergy from time to time remind the faithful to make provision for their young children, with the writing of wills, so that they can be cared for. Please see me afterwards if you need a nudge in that process. It's what I do.

Many who have cultivated a faith in God over the course of their lives reach a moment when they can, in all honesty and peace, say: I am open, if not ready, for what comes next. It doesn't mean we don't fight and long to stay healthy and alive and active as we can, it means that given the grace of

faith, we can trust that life continues beyond what we know. If God is love, then those we have loved will remain in the center and the heart of God's concern now and forever – here and beyond. As worried and anxious as Jesus may have been about the future, he shared with those he loved a prayer.

It is always telling as ask ourselves: what is it that is most on our minds and in our prayers at a given time? What is the last thing we think about before we go to sleep and the first they we think about when we wake up? What is the tape that keeps being played over and over again? Are our thoughts and prayers weighted more towards anxiety and worry and fear than gratitude and joy? I for one bounce around quite a bit, sometimes in the same sitting.

It is telling what was on Jesus' mind. He of course wanted his friends to love one another. He told them that he would go head of them and prepare a place for them – in the Father's house with many dwelling places or many mansions in the older version -- and that he would come again and take them to himself. "I am the way, and the truth and the life." He would not leave them orphaned. And especially as we look towards next Sunday and Pentecost, he promised to send them an Advocate, to teach and remind them. Jesus covered all the bases.

And then he prayed for those in that upper room and those who would follow, which includes us today. "That they may all be one." Ever since Jesus prayed those words, we have wrestled and debated their meaning. What does not mean to be one as Jesus and the Father are one? Does being one mean being united or unified or together? This oneness Jesus desires seems aspirational, elusive and daunting.

Yet as Jesus had said before: if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand (Mark 3:25). The Apostle Paul would say later: I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. (1 Corinthians 1:10) And again Paul would return to this theme of oneness: Ephesians 4:4–6 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

It is right and good to desire and work towards oneness and unity. Do we not, as children of God, have more in common than makes us different?

Many Christians have taken this verse and prayer, that they may all be one, as a measurement about how the church has made of mess of things since Jesus departed. Having one large universal institutional church did not last very long. As new believers went north and south, east and west different ways and customs and languages made unity increasingly hard – and yes, politics entered in. Christians have split into branches of the same faith from the first centuries and now there are thousands of denominations around the world, many of them claiming to be the One True Church, instead of a being a part of the one church.

I cannot help but think about the future – cast a vision for what the mission and ministry landscape might be in the next 50 to 100 years in Exeter and New England. For the early settlers, it mattered mightily to remain within their ethnic and faith heritage and be a loyal Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Congregationalist or Baptist. Those old-world distinctions mean little to today's and tomorrow's believers who care more about programs for their children, outreach that makes a

difference, and accessible parking to the arguments of dogma of yesterday. The truth is is that Exeter and most towns and cities in America have too many churches and not enough Christians. Maybe Jesus' prayer of oneness will be realized when practical and frugal New Englanders decide that it doesn't make sense to heat so many buildings through the long winters. Maybe the oneness Jesus desired for those who would come after will allow us to turn towards one another to solve the great challenges of living in a changing world. Our climate is changing if not warming. Refugees are on the move around the globe. The gap between the super-rich and everyone else is growing. People are disconnected from one another and lonely.

That they all may be one.

This prayer for oneness should remind us that we are all flesh and blood, water and skin, bones and cells. That we should not hide behind the outer physical differences that often define and divide us. We are, after all, all made in God's image and all have equal value in God's sight. There is no one lesser or greater among us.

We can do more, be more, love more, together than we can alone. God rejoices more when two are reconciled than when they break off and walk apart and alone.