

*Brothers and Sisters, Fathers! Bless. As you know, Jim Forest recently fell asleep in the Lord. I found the sermon he had planned to give at our church when he came to Toronto a few years ago. I am sharing this with you...*

— pRoberto, 28 January 2022

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## **Sermon for Sunday 12 June 2016, John 17:1-13, St Silouan the Athonite Church, Toronto**

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus praying to the Father for his disciples, that is to say praying for us, for all baptized people and for all those making their way to the Church — once again that's us, for who can say he or she has yet arrived? Baptism is a border crossing, not a destination. We are each of us on our way, step by step, and sometimes misstep by misstep.

What's the context of this prayer? It's just before his passion. In sight of the cross — his execution is only hours away — Jesus tells his Father that he is no more of this world but that those whom he has gathered remain in the world. He calls on his Father to keep them — to protect them — in his name “that they may be one even as we are one.”

The third verse is the declaration that I find most striking: “This is eternal life, that they know you, Father, as the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

*Knowing the only true God is eternal life.*

Let's look more closely at just a few key words, starting with “knowing”. This is much more than knowing the price of something or knowing the sun rises in the east. It is akin to marital knowing. “Adam and Eve knew each other,” we read in Genesis. Knowing God is living with God and in God. Knowing God is an ever-expanding intimate relationship.

And what about “true”? “True” and “truth” are words with infinite depths — not easy words to take on board.

A few nights ago my wife and I found ourselves reading a poem by Seamus Heaney that includes the line: “Tell the truth. Do not be afraid.” The next day we discovered that Heaney's last words were in Latin, “*Noli timere*,” which means “Do not be afraid.”

*Tell the truth. Do not be afraid.* Not only is fear a potential obstacle for telling the truth — you can get into lots of trouble for telling the truth — but fear is an impediment to knowing the truth. The truth can be upsetting. It can uproot your life. It can make relationships but also destroy them. It can cost your job. It can subject you to ridicule. Just to admit you believe in God will, for some people, put you on their stupid people list.

We believe in the true God and in the one God we see an incomprehensible three-ness — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One God, not a proliferation of gods. We reject as un-true and non-existent all the competing gods of antiquity. We reject the claims of all Caesars, the great and powerful rulers, to be regarded as divine. We have another ruler, the true God. “Put not your trust in princes,” we are reminded Sunday after Sunday in the Liturgy of St John of Chrysostom. Only God deserves our absolute trust.

We are called to center our lives around the one true God. That means we don't just memorize sentences that reveal what God wants of us to do but we struggle to live those words, to translate them into life. As Metropolitan Anthony used to say, “We should try to live in such a way that if the Gospels were lost, they could be re-written by looking at us.”

One does not enter heaven by reciting the Creed correctly or by passing a theology test but by becoming a living channel of the divine mercy. Participating in God's mercy we already have eternal life.

A major part of living in God's mercy is not being merciless. That's no so hard. When others have needs, try to help. When there is war, refuse to be part of it. Where there is deceit, tell the truth. For we know — Jesus made it clear — that what we do to the least person we do to him. For Christ is with us. He is and always shall be.

I am reminded of an exchange between the often-imprisoned Jesuit poet Daniel Berrigan and a reporter. The reporter asked, "Do you believe Jesus Christ will come again?" Dan's answer was, "He never left."

One key element of the prayer of Jesus, our gospel reading this morning, is that we, his disciples, will be one even as Jesus and his Father are one. It's a prayer that requires our active collaboration. God does not force us into unity. What a sad spectacle it is to see how divided we are, not only Christian from Christian but child of God from child of God. Far from obeying Christ's commandment to love our enemies we don't even love our neighbor.

The walls that separate us are built of bricks of fear. Fear rather than the Gospel shapes so many of our choices, big and small. The toxic part fear plays in our lives is a point stressed by the prominent Greek Orthodox theologian and bishop, Metropolitan John Zizioulas:

*The essence of sin is the fear of the other, which is part of the rejection of God. Once the affirmation of the "self" is realized through the rejection and not the acceptance of the other ... it is only natural and inevitable for the other to become an enemy and a threat.... The fact that the fear of the other is pathologically inherent in our existence results in the fear not only of the other but of all otherness. This is a delicate point requiring careful consideration, for it shows how deep and widespread fear of the other is: we are not afraid simply of certain others, but even if we accept them, it is on condition that they are somehow like ourselves. Radical otherness is an anathema. Difference itself is a threat. That this is universal and pathological is to be seen in the fact that even when difference does not in actual fact constitute a threat for us, we reject it simply because we dislike it. Again and again we notice that fear of the other is nothing more than fear of the different. We all want somehow to project into the other the model of our own selves.<sup>1</sup>*

What is the antidote for fear? Are there any remedies? How at least can fear play a smaller role in the choices we make? The development of a stronger, deeper spiritual life is surely at the core of an answer. If fear is not to have a dominant role in our lives, a great deal of inner strength is needed. Without it the voice of conscience — and the courage to follow it — will be suppressed.

Let me finish by repeating just six words: *Tell the truth — don't be afraid.*

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from "Communion and Otherness"; full text: <http://incommunion.org/?p=234>.