Enfolded, Unfolded, Made One: Unity in the Holy Spirit

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“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. 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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. " —John 17.20-23 NRSV

Jesus’ prayer for Christian unity is not merely that we be one. His prayer is that we may be one as he and the Father are one. “…that they may be one, as we are one.” (verse 22)

T
he early Church Mothers and Fathers loved this text. For them, Jesus’ prayer was the kernel for what eventually developed into the doctrine of the Trinity. Per their reading of this text (and other texts too), Christ (as “Son”) and the Father are one in that each indwells the other. “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you…” (verse 21) Athanasius of Alexandria declared, “The Son has all that the Father has.” Gregory of Nazianzus concurs, “All that the Father has is the Son’s, and vice versa.” They are working from Jesus’ words in John: “All that the Father has is mine.” (John 16.15) The Son receives eternally from the Father, by the Father’s eternal self-emptying. And this never-ending self-emptying is reciprocated by the Son boundlessly giving all back to the Father: “…glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.” (John 17.1) In this mutual indwelling then, the God the Father is actually more like God the Mother, as theologian Kathryn Tanner argues, who bears the life of the Son from within Herself. Jesus professes, “I am in you.”

Understood in trinitarian terms, the unity in God is not a static thing. Rather, divine unity is an inexhaustible movement of total, eternal sharing and receiving, filling and emptying, sacrifice and fulfillment. As ever-flowing and over-flowing Oneness, God “unfolds and enfolds;” to borrow from Nicolas of Cusa (15th century mystic). And this movement of unfolding and enfolding between the Mother and the Son is known in Christian tradition as the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the Love, Augustine maintains, between the Lover (Father) and the Beloved (Son).

As Disciples, we need not confess this triune vision of God—no creed but Christ!—though I do in my liturgical and scholarly life. (Barton Stone did not, but Alexander Campbell did, though he preferred the biblical term “Godhead.”) Nevertheless, this challenging yet beautiful image—God is Beauty itself—gives us a glimpse into what it means for the Church to be one as God is one. The unity of the Church is not static either. You see, when Jesus prayed that “they may be one, as we are one,” he was calling us to be courageous enough to empty ourselves for others and for the Other, and to be vulnerable enough to be filled by others and by the Other. Christ’s prayer is a command to be an unfolding and enfolding people. It is a summons to sacrificially share ourselves to others and to radically receive from others.

This may by scary stuff for some of us, particularly for those who have been forced to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of a few—women, African Americans in the U.S., the poor from the Two-Thirds World, etc. Though I disagree with her theological reflections the cross, the womanist theologian Deloris Williams is right in highlighting all the ways that “cross”, “emptying”, and “sacrifice” language has been deployed in the oppression of people, especially, in our context, of Black female bodies. Truly, as Williams asserts, there is nothing of God in this legacy of “Christianized” exploitation. Yet the charge is not to force others to empty themselves for our benefit (which is oppressive), but to willingly and vulnerably “lose” ourselves in Love, for the sake of the world (which is freeing). (cf. Matthew 16.25; Mark 8.35; Luke 9.24) “…that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me.” (verse 23)

…To willingly and vulnerably lose ourselves, in Love! This is where the Holy Spirit comes in. Our unity is not inculcated in creeds, councils or assemblies, as valuable as these are for Disciples engaged in ecumenism and common witness. Our unity is gifted by the Spirit. As I elucidated above, the Spirit is the movement between the begetting Mother and the begotten Son, the flow of sharing and receiving, of emptying and filling between them. The Spirit is love—a love that empowers us to be unfolded into and enfolded by the world in liberating mission. “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.” (1 John 4.13-14)

To be “filled with the Spirit” is a dangerous, radical, vulnerable thing. For by the Spirit, we dare, for the sake of unity, to be spilt out into others and split open by others. And in our receiving and sharing, we encounter the Holy Movement, the Sacred Dance, the Father of us all (Malachi 2.10), our strong Mother (Isaiah 66.13), made known to us in Christ (John 14.7) and by the power of the Holy Spirit (John 14.26).

Questions:
1. What do you think it means when Jesus declares that he is in the Mother/Father, and the Mother/Father, in him? And what do you think it means when to be “in God”?
2. In what ways are we (or can we be) unfolded into the world? In what ways are we (or can we be) enfolded by the world?
3. Even as we maintain the importance of being emptied as the body of Christ, how can we guard against using in exploitative ways “emptying” and “sacrificial” language to justify and even “Christianize” oppression and marginalization?
4. In John 17, Jesus does not teach unity in a discourse, nor does he describe it in a parable. Instead, he prays for unity. In what ways is this significant for how we understand unity? Why is it important that Jesus frames unity as a prayer?

Prayer: Unfolding and Enfolding God, fill us with your Love, with your Spirit, that we may be one. And united, may we be poured out as the continuing presence of Christ. And poured out, may we be filled anew as we encounter your beautifying grace at work in the world. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your Beauty made flesh. Amen.