

Uniquely Singular Yet Profoundly Plural

Easter 4; Series A
Acts 2:42-47

A blessed Mother's Day to all of the mothers and soon-to-be mothers that are with us this morning. We all have memories of our mothers. Some of you women may have desires and anticipations of motherhood. Many of the women have memories of being a mother. Some of these memories are good while others may not be so good. I want to begin this morning, though, by sharing one memory of my mother with all of you.

Throughout most of our days in grade school my mother made a commitment to be there with me and my siblings when we got on the bus in the morning and off the bus in the afternoon. By making it a point to be there for each of us she made us all feel cared for as individuals. Yet at the same time this action strengthened the bond and unity of the family. She modeled togetherness as a family. This unity and togetherness resulted in a lot of shared experiences as a family. Mothers are important elements of the household community in this way. Most mothers seem to have a natural nurturing character that can often bring about a "uniquely singular yet profoundly plural" sort of environment. The mother treats and care for each person as an individual, yet, each child is seen as part of the larger family unit.

As members of the Church "we are uniquely singular and profoundly plural." The early Church was a community of faith that had a character of being "uniquely singular yet profoundly plural." We read about this character of the Church in our reading from the Book of Acts.

They were individual Christians who each had faith in Christ, our risen Lord. Last week we heard a small piece of Peter's Pentecost Sermon. In that section of his sermon we heard that God desires every individual, every single person, to "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins" (Acts 2:38). Peter even says that this promise of forgiveness of sins and right relationship with God is for all people—"for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39). As a postscript to Peter's Pentecost sermon we heard this description, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). The early Christian Church consisted of individuals who repented, were forgiven, and received the Holy Spirit. Uniquely singular individuals who are safe in Christ.

Our reading today from the Book of Acts follows on the heels of last week's snippet from Peter's Pentecost proclamation. We read that every time these first, individually singular Christians gathered together in a community of faith they did certain things. To be precise, they consistently did four things. They devoted themselves to the teaching and preaching of the Christian faith. They participated in the Lord's Supper and other fellowship meals together, they prayed with and for one another, and they cared for the needs of others through their financial tithes and offerings (Acts 2:42-46). Just as we still do so today, the first Christians gathered together regularly with one another and around God's Holy Word and his Sacraments. Today's reading shows us that the individual Christians were also, at the same time, part of a profound plurality. They were called individually and gathered into a community of faith. The first Christians were at the same time *uniquely singular yet profoundly plural*.

Sometimes as Christians we have a tendency to emphasize either the singularity or the plurality in a way that is harmful to the whole community of believers. We can see the danger of this even in our household family life. The other day I was watching a movie in which a mother said to one of her children, "You know, you were always my favorite." The daughter responded by scolding her mother and saying, "Mom, you're not supposed to say that." The daughter is right, isn't she? Even if a mother has a favorite child she never makes it known to anyone. To do so would be to make one individual child more important or have a different status than another. And the results can be catastrophic for the entire family. So also in a community of faith there may be a tendency to give into the desires and preferences of one individual or group over another because that person or group may be complaining more, desiring more attention, or wield more monetary power and influence than another person or group. To give into such tendencies though would be to emphasize the individual over and against the whole group in a way that can do damage to the whole community of faith.

We can also emphasize the plurality or whole community over and against the singular individual in a way that is harmful. Imagine if a mother let the family eat dessert as a meal for every meal simply because it was cheaper, faster, easier to do so, and resulted in fewer complaints. It might be good for the family's bottom line but what about making certain that the family has a well-balanced, nutritious diet? In the Church the community or plurality can be overemphasized when too much emphasis is placed on our techniques, programs, and methods to achieve a certain picture of the Church. Maybe it is to make the Church as a whole grow in membership or in the amount of tithes and offerings. In this way the personal faith growth of the individual members can be sacrificed for tangible, numerical growth.

When we look at the picture of the Christian Church that is given to us in our reading we find *a Church that exists in tension*—it is at the same time *uniquely singular and profoundly plural*. It is a community of faith where the individually singular Christians gather together with one another and around God's Word and his Sacraments.

So how do we keep the tension and balance of being a community of faith that is *at the same time uniquely singular and profoundly plural*? The words of Martin Luther come to mind as he explains what it means for the Christian Church to confess in the Apostles' Creed that it believes "in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." He says, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (*Small Catechism*, 3rd Article of the Apostles' Creed).

The description of the early Christian Church that we heard in our reading follows the events of the Day of Pentecost when God gives the Holy Spirit as his gift to the Church. And then we read that individual Christians were personally repenting, being forgiven, being baptized, and being called to a community of believers around the Word of God and the Holy Sacraments.

Just as you and I are born into a family not by any work or effort of our own but out of pure gift and grace, so too you and I are reborn into the Church and called to belong to a community of faith not by any work or effort of our own. The Holy Spirit has worked through a living Word to bring you to repentance and to trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit has worked individually and personally through the waters of Holy Baptism to give you a rebirth and a renewal (Titus 3:5). The Holy Spirit has uniquely called you, gathered you, and sanctified you in Christ, the very one who, as one uniquely singular individual, took the sins of the whole world upon himself and forgave them. The very one who, as a uniquely singular individual, conquered death to join you to himself and to all Christians in an eternal community of faith—the communion of the saints—*uniquely singular yet profoundly plural*.

As members of a community of faith we continue to live as God’s stewards by the strength of his Spirit. By living in the Spirit and in Christ and regularly gathering as a community of faith to receive God’s grace in the Word and the Sacraments we live in the tension of being *uniquely singular yet profoundly plural Christians*. This is comforting to know. This means that there is forgiveness for us when we tend to see ourselves as solo performances in the church and demand that community of believers cater to our individual preferences. At the same time there is reassurance that this is the Lord’s Church and he is ultimately in charge of maintaining, sustaining, and growing it. Our plans, methods, techniques, programs, volunteer efforts and monetary gifts are good and helpful. It is part of godly stewardship. It is part of living as a Christian who is *uniquely singular yet profoundly plural*. At the same time, let us trust that such things are not and never will be a silver bullet to growing a community of faith numerically or creating the picture of the Church that we have in our minds. As we heard in our reading, “*The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved*” (Acts 2:47, emphasis mine). Being a community of faith that is gathered regularly and faithfully around the Word and the Sacraments is what our Lord desires most.

This Mothers’ Day, Whether you are a mother or have another calling that the Lord has given you, remember that as a Christian who is part of a community of faith, God has called you through his Spirit to live and grow as one who is *uniquely singular yet profoundly plural*. Amen.