

John 17:20-26
Seventh Sunday of Easter (C)
16 May 2010

“That We May Be One”

There’s a story that’s been around for awhile, but I hope you won’t mind if I tell it again. It’s about a group of new arrivals to heaven meeting St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. Peter begins to show them around, pointing out all the sights of heavenly glory to lots of ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ from the crowd. He explains how the Lord has prepared this beautiful place because He wanted all His people to be full of joy in their heavenly home. Suddenly, Peter stops a short distance from a massive building which is kilometres long and high, without any doors or windows. “While we pass this building,” he says, “you must walk quietly and make absolutely no noise”; so the group tiptoes obediently past the walls of the building without a sound. But, once past, an inquisitive soul asks Peter, “Why did we have to be so quiet when we passed that building?” “God put the Lutherans in there,” responds Peter; “because they can think they’re the only ones up here.”

Each time I hear that story it has a different denominational tag to it; but the point, of course, is that membership in a particular church body isn’t necessarily going to determine who gets through the gates of heaven. It pokes fun at those who think they’re the only ones who have gotten it totally right; but, like most jests, it also takes a more serious swipe at the possibility that some Christians, even Lutheran Christians, might be happy only if they think they’re the only ones who will end up in heaven. It illustrates the sad and seemingly hopeless disunity that infects the churches on earth; a disunity which has meant the formation of thousands of church bodies and, many times, separate factions within each church body.

I guess most of us are troubled by that reality. It really isn’t a joking matter—the Lord isn’t laughing, for sure. I think all of us willingly pray with Him, as He did in today’s Gospel, “that they may all be one, just as You, Father are in Me and I am in You . . . that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me” (John 17:21,23).

As you know, history is full of efforts to repair the fractures which have opened up in the Christian Church. In fact, during this past 60 years especially, those efforts have become more intense, in some ways even desperate. Organizations such as the World Council of Churches and Lutheran World Federation have come into being – groups whose very reason for existence is not simply to promote visible unity but make it actually happen. Throughout the world this has become a prime focus for many in the churches. I can tell you that there has been increasing pressure from some to “forget about the doctrines that divide,” and to come together: “Why don’t you Missouri Synod Lutheran types join with us? Do you think you’re better than us?”

II. It’s clear from our text: our Lord Jesus wants His Body, the Church, to be one – to be united. And yet, when thinking about that, there are three questions with which we need to wrestle as we pray and strive toward true unity. Those questions are, 1) “What is the ‘unity’ the Lord of the Church has in mind?” 2) “Why is the unity of the Church important?” and 3) “How can unity be achieved?”

Let’s take the first question first: “What is the ‘one’ness the Lord is talking about in our text? When Jesus speaks of oneness, He describes it in terms of the unity He has with God the Father. He prays we may be one, “just as you, [Father], are in Me and I am in You.” Back in John 10 Jesus insists “the Father and I are one!” (10:30); not the same, but still one. While we can’t explain the internal unity of the Holy Trinity with scientific measurements, we can say that the tri-unity of divine Persons is more than something organizational or structural. The unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in one Godhead isn’t some nice full-communication arrangement between three gods, but a unity wrapped up in the very nature of the oneness of His divine being and substance.

In a similar way even though there are many churches, in truth there is only one—“the holy Christian Church” we just confessed in the Creed. The body of Christ is not divided—can’t be divided! Its unity is wrapped up in the very being of our risen and glorified Lord Jesus; we are in Him, and He in us; just as He is in the Father and the Father in Him. Every person, living and dead, who trusts in Him as Saviour and Lord, to the glory of the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is a member of His Body. We don’t have to create that unity; in Christ, God already has.

And yet, think about this—can we see the Trinity? Is there any time we can point and say, “Here He is”? The Holy Trinity is an article of faith, something believed but not seen with our human eyes. Like Moses, we don’t see God—at least not head-on in all His awesome glory—but we can see where He’s been and what He’s done.

And so it is with the Church. In the purest sense, the Church is an article of faith, believed upon but unseen with our earthly eyes. And yet, we can see where the Church *is* by what God *does* in and through it: what He does through the forgiveness of sins in Jesus and all the benefits of salvation as they are delivered to us in His blessed Word and Sacrament. Our Lutheran Confessions have said: “We know the church is present among those who rightly teach the Word of God and rightly administer the sacraments” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XIV,4).

And so, the Church isn’t primarily a visible organization, but those in whom God works by His visible means of grace. The Church isn’t something we have to ‘make happen’, because the Holy Spirit does so as He creates faith through the message and action of the Gospel. The Church comes into being as people are drawn into the life of the Triune God—taken up into the unity of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as His name is placed upon us in Holy Baptism—and nurtured in that unity by means of His living Word and through communion with us in His true Body and Blood at His altar.

But, if that’s true, then why are we so concerned about visible unity of the church or, as the second question I raised earlier asks: “Why is the unity of the Church so important?” Jesus’ answer to that question is “so that the world may believe.”

Unity is important because without it the church’s message can sound distorted to those who hear it. Whether the churches are visibly united under one banner doesn’t add anything to the Gospel, but disagreement in teaching can get in the way of the clear proclaiming and hearing of the message which leads to faith in our Lord Christ.

To be sure, as the Bible says, God’s Word is living and active (Hebrews 4:12), and can accomplish His purpose in spite of the ways we manage to muddy the waters (Isaiah 55:11). But, as those whom the Spirit has called by the Gospel, we are called to confess Him and His Word with one voice and with a clear signal (Romans 15:5-6, 1 Corinthians 14:7-8).

We don't want to garble the message by quarreling over words which sound different but mean the same thing, or confuse the message by naively agreeing to use words and terms which sound the same but really mean something very different to each group (see 2 Timothy 2:14-15).

Unity is important because the Gospel message is important. The Gospel is the "power of salvation" (Romans 1:16). It's what the Holy Spirit uses to create faith (Romans 10:17, John 17:8,20). It's what our Lord meant when He prayed in the verses just before our text, "[Father,] sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

You see why we are so concerned to get the message straight? That's why we need to join in church fellowship with fellow Christians who are like-minded, who can join in proclaiming with us a message that is clear and consistent. It doesn't mean people from other Christian groups aren't saved, or that their message is necessarily all or mostly wrong, but it may mean that we can't join in altar and pulpit fellowship with them because of lack of unity in what we believe, teach and confess.

Sadly, one of the most dangerous results of the ecumenical movement of the last number of decades has been the minimizing of doctrine. "Doctrine divides," many tell us; and since it divides, they say, we shouldn't talk about differences in teaching, just concentrate on what we hold in common. But, if that's so, then we can't talk about Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, or how a person is converted, or whether Jesus is true God, or if He is the only way of salvation He claims to be (John 14:6, Acts 4:12, 1 Timothy 2:3)—the very teachings and means to which our Christian faith and the assurance of our salvation are tied!

And that's why we have always had to stand by the following principles:

One, we rejoice that we are already united with all those who trust in Jesus as their Saviour and Lord, that is, the "invisible," seen-by-faith Church already one in the Triune God; visible disunity cannot destroy that unity or the effectiveness of the Gospel.

Two, when we disagree in fundamental doctrines (that is, teachings which can affect the meaning of the Gospel and the assurance of salvation), we cannot participate in unionistic services which compromise or undermine the integrity of the Gospel message or give a

false impression or mixed message of what is genuinely believed by those gathered.

But, three, we can and must relate to one another in Christian love and kindness, and feel free to cooperate in those things (like World Relief, social welfare or something like the St. John's Kitchen, for example), which do not compromise our proclamation of the Gospel.

But, while we cannot be faithful except by standing firmly on the teachings of our Lord and calling error error when it violates that Word; we need to be careful about giving unnecessary offense to those outside and inside Christ's church by aiming our big guns at each other instead of training our weapons on the real enemy, Satan. We must not bypass doctrine or sidestep the sometimes painful task of searching for common confession of God's truth revealed in the Scriptures, but that doesn't mean we have to beat each other over the head at every opportunity. To be frank, we need to spend the bulk of the time God has given us joining in with those, as we have in Lutheran Church-Canada, who are like-minded, so that we can proclaim the truth of Christ to those who don't know Him, rather than endlessly debate or nervously avoid discussions of doctrine, or settle for the 'least common denominator' for fear someone will be offended or feel left out. Like individual army corps under the leadership of one Supreme Commander, armies who speak different theological languages and have different practices and strategies, we need to agree that we do not agree, and then concentrate on battling on the same front with the objective of liberating the world for Christ, rather than worrying about whether we can achieve some kind of visible unity just for the sake of marching in some public parade that gives the appearance of some giant world-wide united force.

So, "How can unity be achieved?" asked the third question. In fact, "Can it ever be achieved?" might be the more realistic question. For certain, it won't happen by setting aside the teachings of Christ on which we disagree. We need to realize and accept that we are not in agreement with some church bodies, and at the same time have confidence that visible disunity cannot destroy the Church or the power of the Gospel, because they are found in God and not in us. True, visible, institutional unity can happen only as we focus our faith on Him and faithfully and humbly devote our allegiance to His Word. It can only happen as we continue to pray with our Lord Jesus that we might be one in truth as He and the Father are one in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

But, whether or not we succeed by His grace to overcome the shortcomings of sinful human nature, stubbornness, pride and miscommunication which divide us, we need to continue to love one another and pray for one another as our Lord loves and intercedes for us. We need to search the Scriptures and pray for faithfulness in understanding them as the Spirit directs. And we need to focus primarily on the mission of introducing the world to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, even if we do not succeed in resolving the things which visibly separate us into our various church bodies, we can be confident that on the Day of our Lord Jesus' coming again, by God's grace, all those dividing walls will be torn down and we will be brought to complete unity, with our eyes and ears and hearts fully opened by the Spirit to be one in fellowship, confession and love for an eternity. "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

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Preached by Pastor Mark Hartburg at
Historic St. Paul's Lutheran Church
137 Queen St. S., Kitchener, Ontario
519-745-4891

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