

Make Us One
Based on John 17:20-26
Easter 7C May 16, 2010
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Today is the last Sunday of the Easter season. For the last six weeks, we have been boldly proclaiming, "Christ Is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!" As we shout out those words, we cannot help but think about life differently. Because Christ is risen, the sins of our past no longer define us. Because Christ is risen, death no longer has the final say in our lives. We now perceive all of life through the eyes of faith.

Next Sunday, we will celebrate Pentecost. Pentecost is that grand festival where God sends the Holy Spirit upon his chosen people. It will be the third distinct way that Almighty God has revealed himself to us – the first as God the Father, the creator of the heavens and the earth; the second as Jesus Christ, the Son of God; then the third, as the Holy Spirit, the one who brings us to faith and then guides and protects us as we make our journey towards our heavenly home.

Next week we will celebrate how indeed we feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in this place as Baleigh Brockman stands before us and says, "Yes, I believe! I will strive to live my life according to the ways of Jesus."

Because Easter and Pentecost are 50 days apart, we often forget that those two events are meant to be seen as one, unifying event. Both events are meant to energize us, to strengthen our faith and draw us closer to God and to one another. Both Easter and Pentecost are meant to unite us, as we say in the creed, into "one holy catholic and apostolic church."

It is fitting, then, that Jesus prays for our unity in the gospel today. Jesus prays to God that the church might be one. It is an important prayer, for how can the church faithfully share the message of God's love, forgiveness, and acceptance if the church does not possess those qualities? Jesus prays that we would be living examples of his teachings, that we would see ourselves as one people with a desire to join together to do the work of God out in the world.

When I see what is happening in the world and in the church today, I feel the need to say, "Jesus, you'd better keep praying!" Instead of unity, everywhere you look there is disagreement and strife. Even young children realize this reality. Listen to these actual letters young kids wrote to God:

Dear God, if we come back as something after we die, please don't let me be Jennifer Applegate. She's not nice. Love, Denise

Dear God, maybe Cain and Abel would not have killed each other if they had their own rooms. It worked with me and my brother.

Dear God, my brother is a rat! You should give him a tail. Sincerely, Danny

Dear God, I bet it is hard for you to love everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in my family and it's hard for me to always love them.

Unity is often hard to come by. Where is unity when half of all marriages end in divorce? Where is unity when now we must wait for someone to buzz us into the entrances of school buildings? Where is unity when over 160 ELCA congregations have voted to leave our church because of the actions at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly?

Jesus, you'd better keep praying!

Because the church is made up of sinners, unity is not an easy thing. Instead of seeing ourselves as united in Christ with a God-given mission and purpose, we have a habit of demanding that the church look just like us and think just like us.

Instead of cooperation and goodwill among all Christians, we seem to find ourselves bickering about the most insignificant things.

Sometimes I wonder if the unity Jesus speaks of is even possible. The unity that Jesus prays for often seems like just a lofty ideal that we can work towards but never really accomplish. Do you know what I mean? We often come to the conclusion that at times we will just have to agree to disagree. But is that the kind of unity that Jesus desires of us?

God understands our struggle for unity. And not only does God understand our struggle, but God has chosen to do something about it. God knows that on our own our selfish attitudes and actions get in the way of true unity. Our humanness tempts us to push our own agendas. And when the church becomes all about us, then the unity that Jesus prays for becomes nearly impossible.

The good news is God understands our struggle for unity. God knows that on our own, the kind of unity God desires from us would not happen. And so God takes matters into his own hands. God sends his Son Jesus to show us a different way to live. God's desire for unity takes on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus models for us how true unity can become a reality. The approach Jesus shares with us is not some kind of elaborate, complicated plan. No, it is quite simple: Jesus tells us to treat other people the way we want to be treated. The Golden Rule.

The kind of unity that Jesus wants us to experience can be achieved if we are willing to see each and every person as a child of God, a sister and brother in Christ – all members of the same heavenly family. True unity can be reached only when we realize that all of us are sinners, in desperate need of God's unconditional forgiveness.

Someone once wrote a poem that drives this point home:

I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven's door,
Not by the beauty of it all, by the lights or its decor.
But it was the folks in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp –
the thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics, the trash.
There stood the kid from seventh grade
 who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbor who never said anything nice.
Herb, who I always thought was rotting away in Hell,
 was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well.
I nudged Jesus, "What's the deal? I would love to hear Your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here? God must've made a mistake.
And why's everyone so quiet, so somber? Give me a clue."
"Hush, child," said Jesus. "They're all in shock.
No one thought they'd see you." (author unknown)

When others make mistakes, instead of judging them, Jesus desires us to extend to them the same kind of forgiveness and love that Jesus has extended to us. When someone doesn't see eye to eye with us, instead of jumping straight to "I'm right, your wrong," Jesus desires us to listen with love, to recognize that all of us have stories that have shaped us into the people that we are.

It boils down to this: Jesus calls us to look at the world through God's eyes rather than through our own human, selfish, judgmental eyes. In order for the church to be all that God has created it to be, we need to realize not only our utter dependence upon God, but our dependence upon one another. We need each other.

Instead of building up walls between ourselves and those we dislike or those with whom we disagree, Jesus calls us to build bridges. Instead of tearing each other down, we should be actively finding ways to build each other up. True unity means that we make a commitment to be there for one another. It means that we lift one another up in times of need. We might have our disagreements, but ultimately, as people united in Christ, we must be willing to work side by side for the glory of God.

The good news about Christian unity is that it doesn't depend solely upon our ability to magically create it. Unity between us and God, between us and others, has already been established through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are one people because God has made us that way. Jesus wants us to simply recognize the unity that is already present among us and to find ways to live out that oneness in our daily lives.

Just think of all the ways that the Holy Spirit unites us:

We have all been showered with the holy waters of Baptism, making us members of the same family of God.

Every Sunday, with Christians all around the world, we confess our faith through the creed, uniting our hearts and minds in the one true faith.

As we gather at the Lord's Table, we all eat of the same bread, and we are united by our conviction that by eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus our sins are wiped clean and eternal life secured.

So many reminders that God has already united us – loved us into unity. Jesus calls us to live out that reality of our unity in our daily lives. We are called to treat each and every person like family, because that is what we are – children of the same heavenly Father. We are called to serve side by side, knowing that the journey is easier and far richer when we do it together.

Jesus prays, "Father, make your people one." May that be our prayer as well. "Lord, make us one." And through our words and deeds, make we make that kind of unity a reality in this place and through the world.

Let it be so. Amen.