

Unity

Seventh Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, May 16, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

While visiting my parents last week for a few days, I served as my mother's "chauffeur"—she injured a tendon in her foot, and although she could walk, I still drove my mother if needed. I agreed to take her to a church meeting. She serves on a task force that's determining if the two small Lutheran congregations in her town should merge. Neither one can survive financially on its own anymore. So merger discussions have begun in earnest.

My mother could have driven herself to that meeting, but I think she wanted her daughter, the pastor, to be present. I knew what my two roles were: Chauffeur my Mom and keep my mouth shut. Which I did pretty well, until the interim pastor asked me to offer a prayer at the end of the meeting. Some folks did not know who I was, other than I looked like my mother's daughter, so I thought I should identify myself. I was immediately asked if I'd ever been through something like a congregational merger. I said I had not. But I offered my perspective as a slightly objective observer, which was this: Their meeting was filled with fellowship, good humor, honest discussion, and kind consideration for others' feelings. I told them it modeled a unity that would serve them well if they proceeded to merge the congregations into one. I said that such a show of unity would surely help the rest of the parishioners through the process. It wasn't that the task force members agreed on everything. They debated which church had the most comfortable pews and the newer furnace. They debated which church building to keep—should that decision be based on the property that would sell most easily to an outside group, or the facility that would best accommodate church growth? No, they didn't agree on everything. But they were honest and gracious in their disagreeing. They listened to one another. They knew their words and decisions were part of a much larger vision of what God intended for the Church to be in that community. Maintaining a vibrant Lutheran presence where they could witness to the saving gift of Jesus Christ became the goal. Ok, so maybe their unity was also based on a common desire for survival. To be truthful, the two parishes had a somewhat contentious relationship for years. Regardless, in this moment, their unity was a precious and needful thing. And I told them so.

Then I offered prayer—this slightly objective observer who on a confirmation day in 1972 affirmed her own faith in the sanctuary of one of those churches (the one with the less comfortable pews). I offered prayer that the task force members and both congregations would be one as they continued deliberating. I prayed for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to guide them. And then I drove my mom home, feeling just a little awkward because I was merely the chauffeur. I hadn't planned on saying anything at all.

The way I read our Gospel lesson, and the entire section of chapters 13-17 in John, which details all Jesus' words to his closest friends the evening before he died, it's like a church meeting—only in the very best sense. Because Jesus is present, and Jesus speaks up! Boy, I'm glad to know Jesus did not hold **himself** back like some slightly objective observer, while his disciples struggled to deal with life in their world as he was poised to leave them! I'm glad to know Jesus taught his disciples that evening, preparing them carefully for what was to happen after he was crucified and risen! I'm especially glad to know, as we heard in our lesson today, that Jesus **prayed** for his disciples, his followers of every generation, for you and for me! We learn Jesus prayed to God the Father that his followers would be **one**--that there would be this unity in them exactly like the unity Jesus had with God the Father. And not a unity simply for unity's sake—"can't we all just get along?"—but a unity that would, in fact, lead to a greater goal. Listen to Jesus' words here, beginning at vs. 20: *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.*** (Emphasis mine.) *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 be completely one, **so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*** (Emphasis mine.)

The greater goal of their unity? That the world would know and believe that God sent Jesus as the gift of salvation and life. When those who follow Jesus Christ as their Lord exhibit such a oneness, they will allow the world to see how great a God our God truly is.

I have a couple reflections on this passage. First, prayer is a venture in conversation with God. But sometimes our prayers are pretty poor, representing our sinful selves more than our saintly selves. For example, you can become overly self-conscious, practically muzzling the Spirit as you try to say just the right things in just the right way. And I recall being warned in seminary not to have a prayer that reiterates my sermon, if I worried that my sermon hadn't been clear. (Maybe I should just prepare a better sermon. Besides, if I can reiterate its main point in one solitary prayer petition, then what the heck am I doing preaching for 20 minutes here?) Or sometimes you pray for something that is not in keeping with God's will, but a more selfish desire: *O Lord, let rain fall upon the earth to nourish our land, only not on the day of our family picnic.* Or our prayer for a specific thing happening in the life of the congregation becomes something like a mini-calendar: *O God, we pray that many people will attend the bible study—which will be held next Tuesday at 10.*

Jesus, though, teaches us much about good prayer. We learn from scripture that Jesus is frequently in conversation with God the Father. There is an ease of intimacy and honesty and love between them. (By the way, that's the kind of conversation Jesus wants his disciples to have with God, too.) And don't you find it moving that, in our lesson today, Jesus is praying for you and me? Think of times

when you knew others were praying for you. They weren't praying for **you** to **do** something. They were praying for **God** to **do** something for you or in you. That's a humbling and meaningful thing. I like knowing Jesus is praying for us, praying that God the Father will **do** something for us or in us.

Besides the fact that Jesus is having this conversation with God the Father on our behalf, the content of his prayer is also interesting. He's praying for a oneness to exist among us so that the world will see God's power and love revealed in Jesus.

Think what this unity looks like, or ought to look like, which will show the world who Jesus is. I don't think it is a unity based on simply agreeing on issues, or using some democratic process where majority rules. Oh, certainly in the workings of a congregation there are times when decisions need to be made, whether through an appropriate voting process or through compromise or general consensus. But this unity prayed for by Jesus must be something more than "can't we all just get along?" or employing a business-style model and Robert's Rules of Order to accomplish tasks of the Church.

The truth is, our unity can't be based on our simply agreeing with one another. Because often we don't! We are, after all, a diverse group of people. We don't share the same political views. We don't like the same type of music. We don't have the same hobbies. And we will disagree on church matters, just like the members of the two Lutheran congregations in my parents' hometown.

Nor can our unity be based on formal democratic process, because someone is always on the losing side of the proposition. Majority may rule, but minority views still exist.

Instead, maybe this unity, this oneness Jesus prays for, is to be realized in our common purpose. And that common purpose that fosters unity is, ironically, also the greater goal of that unity. It comes around full circle. Speaking Jesus Christ to the world unites us, so that we can speak Jesus Christ to the world!

You know, Jesus prayed that you and I would be united in order to witness to him in a deeply fractured world, and exhibit a unity the world so rarely sees. I suspect many folks in our fractured world have been profoundly disappointed and are now profoundly cynical because everywhere they look, there is division, there is schism, there are factions tearing away at each other in the most uncivil exhibition of disunity one can imagine. They see this disunity in the halls of congress, in the talking heads of the media, on the playing field, on the city streets, and between peoples of every race, religion, and ethnic stripe who have forgotten or may never have discovered that they are all one because they are all beloved of God. But our unity in this place may very well help them learn that truth.

You and I have the same common purpose as that of those two little, struggling congregations considering merger in my parents' hometown—to be a vibrant presence in this community, witnessing to the saving gift of Jesus Christ through our words and deeds. To encourage one another in that witness, and strengthen

one another to be Christ-like both in this place, and wherever we are sent each day. And if we worry that we cannot live up to the challenge of being one, if we ourselves are occasionally disappointed with one another or are at risk of becoming cynical, then we must remind each other on a regular basis that someone we know, someone loving and powerful, is still at work **praying** for us. **AMEN.**

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