

Easter 7, 5.24.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 6:1-314; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-31; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

“That They May Be One”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. In today’s gospel, Jesus prays “*Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.*” In verse 23 Jesus repeats these words: “*so that they may be one, as we are one.*” These words are part of what is often called Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer.” This prayer is concerned with the unity of Jesus’ followers with Jesus and the Father and the promised Holy Spirit. Jesus’ prayer anticipates Pentecost.

This prayer also forms the basis of the modern ecumenical movement. In this prayer Jesus declares the purpose of his followers’ unity: “*so that the world may believe.*” The great purpose of Christian unity - the unity of Jesus’ followers, the church is “*so that the world may believe.*” These words are also the motto of the World Council of Churches and form the basis of modern ecumenical Christian unity. After centuries of religious wars and theological disunity, the ecumenical movement emerged through the guidance of the Holy Spirit during the twentieth century as a sign of Christ’s ongoing presence in the church. There is no Christian church without the Holy Spirit, and without the Holy Spirit unity among Christians is impossible. Unity in the church is not a product of human power; unity is evidence of God’s presence in midst of the church.

In today’s gospel, Jesus draws a clear distinction between the world and the unity of his church. Jesus said that he was not asking the Father on behalf of the world, but on behalf of his followers. Jesus’ concern is for the church alone in the world, and at times, at odds with and misunderstood by the world. However, the world is also where Jesus’ followers need to confess their faith with unity of voice, witnessing to God’s love and justice with hands working in unity to forgive, embrace, welcome, and feed the world.

Early in the church’s history, the church was persecuted by the world. After the church became a Roman imperial church, the church gradually became identified with the political power and authority *of* the world. This identity of the church and the world was called “Christendom.” This, of course, helped the church grow and expand around the world, yet at the same time, this cooperation with the world was always an uneasy alliance. Christendom meant that the church had become part of the colonial enterprise, if not actively, then passively. It meant that they church became complicit

in the emerging capitalistic and industrial world's dehumanizing power over people. As human beings became treated as numbers and disposable resources, the church was challenged to stand against the world. The church's alliance with the world *is different from the church's mission in the world*. The church's mission in the world is to share God's transformative love, grace and justice, something the world can never do because God has made this the mission of the church.

We all know that achieving unity is not easy. In recent days we have seen how hard it is for human beings to agree on many things. Even though we realize in our better moments how much we need one another, human beings continue to mistrust and openly assail one another. During this pandemic we have seen political, economic and cultural factions in this nation in open conflict with one another. We are witnessing an emerging cultural struggle of debate and disunity about how to reopen our communities during a pandemic. Though there is no vaccine or treatment, other than remaining socially distant, we continue to see open denial about the seriousness of an illness that *is itself very unified* in its destructive power over human life. We want to get back to normal, and need to get back to normal, because peoples' lives have been affected emotionally, physically, and economically by this pandemic. Yet without unity of purpose in the world humanity is ill equipped to combat and overcome this crisis. Achieving unity in the world is not an easy task.

Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers is central for our unity as the body of Christ, the church. Jesus knows human potential for disunity. Jesus knows that as human beings, we also remain captive to sin – captive to our own self-centeredness. We bring our human disunity and sinfulness into the church, as people in need of forgiveness. We are products of the world and its disunity, and this is why Jesus prays for the unity of his followers. Unity in the church requires the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that gathers the church, opens our hearts to hear God's word, and opens our hands in service toward the world.

For two months I have preached in an empty sanctuary. For two months, you and the communities in which you live have been asked to remain apart because of this pandemic. It has not been and is not easy, and we are not yet finished. People long for community because God has created us for life together. Our bishop, Bishop Timothy Smith, wrote last week that the North Carolina Synod will stand "in solidarity with our North Carolina ecumenical partners, the Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church, AME Zion Church and other traditions to refrain from in-person gatherings of more than 10 people until the North Carolina governor moves us into Phase 3." Jesus' prayer for unity affects how we walk with other churches in the world. We do not walk alone as a

church. We also do not walk as an arm of the state. We walk, led by the Holy Spirit, in prayerful unity with other churches because together we are the body of Christ in the world. The purpose of Christian unity is “*so that the world may believe.*” So in unity with the bishop, and in unity with our ecumenical partner churches, St. Mark’s is planning to “re-gather” for “reduced capacity” worship on Sunday, July 12. More information about what this means will follow.

A time of disunity and conflict in the world is a “moment” for unity in Christ’s church. The Holy Spirit continues to do something new in our midst. During the pandemic, I have been very proud of our congregation. Though we have been separated by quarantine, we have remained unified in mission. Our social ministries have continued to be active in feeding the hungry. Our youth and family program has continued to flourish in new ways, helping children, youth, and families grow spiritually. Our music program has brought the joy of sacred music into our lives in new ways. Through the dedication and faithfulness of our communication team, we have found new ways to communicate the gospel to the world. Though we have been apart, though we have suffered, St. Mark’s is alive because Christ continues to unify us in mission.

It is not the world that gives the church unity. It is only Christ who grants the church unity. In today’s second reading, Peter writes, “*Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.*”

During this time of pandemic, we remember that the forces of disunity - sin, death and evil - continue in the world in conflict with God’s emerging kingdom of peace and justice. Cast your anxiety on Christ; resist evil and death; and remain steadfast in faith. When everything seems like it is flying apart and the center won’t hold – let Christ be your center.

Already in the early church, Paul spoke of Christian unity in Galatians writing, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” Human beings are always tempted to be divided by difference. Like Paul’s day, we also have different identities, ethnicities, loyalties, social standings, political leanings, but in Christ we remember that we have been made one in the waters of baptism.

By the grace of God we have unity in Christ. God “restores, supports, strengthens, and establishes” us in unity of faith and mission toward the world. Cast your anxiety on Christ; resist evil and death; remain steadfast in faith, so that the world may believe. Amen.