

5.12.2024 Easter 7

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

“That they may be one”

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

In today’s gospel Jesus prays for the unity of his body, the church. Jesus’ words, “*that they may be one,*” describe the unity that all Christians share in one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one God (Ephesians 4:4-6). Today’s gospel anticipates the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that gathers all nations into the unity of the church.

We confess this unity with the words of the ecumenical Nicene Creed, “We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” The church is one in unity with Christ, and at the same time, a diversity of churches around the world expresses the fulness this unity in Jesus Christ.

Our unity as a church is not made from our human will or attempts at holiness. In confessing the church as “holy” we believe God brings the church into its sacred unity. In confessing the church “catholic,” we believe the church is universal and found in every place amid the diversity of human culture and language. We confess the church as “apostolic” because it proclaims the apostles’ message about Christ to the world. We are made into one holy, catholic, and apostolic church through the unity that Christ shares with us.

Jesus’ prayer “*that they may be one, as we are one*” expresses the eternal unity we share with the Son and the Father. In an increasingly divided and broken world, these words are a vision for unity, always encouraging us to make our unity with Christ visible in this world.

The unity that Jesus prays for is not a human-made unity of church organization, structure, or polity; it is unity that comes only from abiding in Jesus Christ. Too often churches have sought unity focusing inward upon their own denominations, structures, and theologies, rather than finding their unity in Jesus Christ. Our unity as the church has its origin and its goal in Christ. As Paul writes, “*Christ is all, and in all*” (Colossians 3:11). It is his unity of love that binds us together with one another.

Jesus also identifies the source of our unity in his words, “*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*” Our unity as a church begins in our hearts, as God’s abiding word of truth gathers, forgives, and sanctifies. The legacy of the Reformation and statements of faith such as the *Augsburg Confession*, describe the church as the place where the gospel is preached and the sacraments administered (CA 7). In other words, the church expresses the unity of word and

sacrament. Our unity is God's gift of grace with us. God is Immanuel – God with us.

It is perhaps appropriate today on Mother's Day to also remind ourselves that early Christians understood the church as the mother of our faith. For example, Cyprian of Carthage wrote, "No one can have God as Father who does not have the church as Mother" (*On the Unity of the Church*, 6). Today as we think about the unity of the church, we are also blessed if we remember the church as our spiritual mother who births, carries, and raises us in the faith. She welcomes us as children of the heavenly Father and nourishes us with the divine word and sacraments of grace and forgiveness.

Thinking about the church as mother is appropriate because our faith is not only "the faith of our fathers," but also the faith of our mothers, grandmothers, and every mother-mentor who has brought us to church, taught us to pray, and modeled for us a holy life of unity with God. Please take a moment today to give thanks for the mother who bore and raised you, the grandmother who perhaps brought you to church, and the many mother-mentors in our lives who have taught and modeled Christian discipleship to you. "No one can have God as Father who does not have the church as Mother."

These images of our unity with the Father and Son, and even with the church as our mother, remind us that in our unity with God, we become family with one another. This unity describes God's loving desire for unity with the whole human family. We have been created for unity with God and with one another that all the world might believe and know the love of Christ. This unity drives us to work for unity in mission, fellowship, action with others in this world "*so that the world might believe*" (John 17:22).

In a world of many languages, cultures, and denominations, over and over unity with Christ was driven home to me as I served as a missionary in Japan. Over the years, I experienced Christ's unity always bringing people of different backgrounds and perspectives together. When I was teaching, I was a member of the Japan Ecumenical Association an organization that brought denominations together for prayer, learning, and fellowship in Christ. I was a board member of the Japan Association of Theological Education (JATE), an ecumenical academic society that planned seminars and worship events for the faculty of different Christian universities and seminaries in Japan. We learned, prayed, and broke bread together, always with Christ at the center.

As a parish pastor in Japan, I also participated in a local ecumenical church association that

included nearly every church in our city. United Church of Christ, Roman Catholic, various Baptist churches, Assemblies of God, the Korean Church in Japan, and Lutherans met regularly for prayer and witness. At Christmas, during Holy Week, and at Easter we witnessed to the gospel message of God's love for this world so that the world might believe. This is what churches do: they make visible the unity and hope we share in Jesus Christ.

This is what we do at St. Mark's as we serve together in our community "*that all the world might believe.*" Unity with Christ means serving in unity with our partners and with our friends in our community.

"*That they may be one*" describes the unity we share with and through Jesus because too often the church has been divided by denominationalism, nationalism, and partisanship. Too often we have limited the gospel by our own thoughts and desires rather than allowing Jesus to lead us into unity transcending our differences and limitations.

In a divided world, we are one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in unity with the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. We are made one that the world might believe.

The gift of unity with Christ is the greatest gift we have as a church. He has called you friends, and his friendship will help you create unity and friendship in all areas of your life and journey in this world.

How is Jesus Christ calling you into fuller unity with him? How is he leading you into new paths of work with his church so that the world might believe?"

Serve him in unity with his church – that all might know God's love in Jesus Christ. Amen.