

5.17.2026 Seventh Sunday of Easter

Rev. Ali Rode

Acts 1:6-14, Psalm 68:1-10. 32-35, 1 Peter 4:12; 5:6-11, John 17:1-11
"By Your Spirit, Make Us One"

"Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."
Matthew 7:7 NRSVUE

Good morning Beloved Children of God.

I have a confession, a Lutheran church is a good place for a confession! We make time for it every Sunday. I have been a frustrated church member who wrote a letter to my senior pastor. Not right now, this was a long time ago. And as it goes, from time to time these things happen, angry letters, frustrated letters, questioning letters...more often now they are in an email or an aside to in the parking lot, but in that time in 2002 I wanted my words to be heard. So, I took out a piece of stationary with matching blue floral envelope...because I meant business. I was 17 at the time and I was preparing for my Senior Year of high school and preparing my application for college where I would go to study youth ministry. Long story short, at a young age I was invested in our youth ministry and our pastor at the time was not called to youth ministry and had shared that with us.

I shared in the letter my worries that our current pastor who was in charge of youth ministry didn't really feel called to that work, but rather other areas of ministry. She ended up being a chaplain, I'm still friends with her, she's an excellent pastor to this day. I knew they were anticipating a change of staff and I was worried that the youth group I had invested so much in would decline and eventually die out. Surely we needed someone who was passionate and able to revive and continue our program that was so important to us as a church.

Then after I wrote the letter, I placed it between my praying hands and knelt at my bedside. I remember praying the prayer with every ounce of my being, feeling the tension in my brain down to my toes thinking if I just prayed strongly enough that my prayer would be answered. In earlier seasons of life, even strong prayers like this were answered, but not always in the way I had wished. But this prayer was really important, it needed to become a reality. We needed a really good youth pastor.

And some weeks later via snail mail, because I had a good pastor, Rev. Barry De. Shetler responded in ink, with that special stationary "from the desk of the senior pastor". He wrote, "Thanks for your note this week. Of course everything you say is correct and I wouldn't find fault anywhere. (Let's just say he was a well seasoned pastor and knew what to say.) Rest assured I am very aware of the past difficulties and disappointments. Please know that I am doing all in my power to assure you that we get the very best Youth Pastor possible here at Christ Church. It is my #1 priority as it is for the District Superintendent. I feel there is a good chance we'll learn something this week. Of course I can do nothing about the past hurts except offer understanding and apology when needed. But more importantly, I want to be sure the program has strong leadership in the future. I think I'm close to it. Thanks again, Yours in Christ, Barry D.

Now, that summer I didn't realize it at the time, but the prayer would be fulfilled...far beyond much more that I ever could have expected. Last Sunday you may have noticed I was not here to worship with you for Mother's Day, but rather I was with my mother in Dayton, Ohio, Kettering to be specific, a suburb in the town where I hail from at my home church Christ Church where I felt my call to listen to my old youth pastor Wayne Botkin who is now entering early retirement after serving 24 years with the same congregation. And I didn't expect it at the time, but I got a "shout out" which is fun.

Now, ministry in that church looks different today. We used to have 3,000 members. Today I know its less. Youth ministry looks different there as it looks different here as it does in many churches. But what

we didn't know then is that ministry would have grown exponentially because of him and the people who partnered with him and supported his work. More about that later.

And I believed then, and I believe now, that God answers prayer. God hears them all. Of course we may not receive the answer we desire, but the prayer and the act of praying is never a waste of energy or time. There is power in prayer to change our circumstances but mostly to change our perspective and open us to the work of the Holy Spirit that is already at work before we even have the thought of prayer in our hearts.

In John's gospel this morning, Jesus is praying for his disciples as he prepares to ascend to return to the Father after his resurrection. And this prayer is referred to in the tradition as, "The High Priestly Prayer". This makes sense, because a priest's role is an intermediary between the people and God. Much like a priest, Jesus is praying in John's Gospel today for the people and their unity with God. Jesus summarizes his role through a narrative prayer, telling his story of His saving work on earth. And then he prays, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." So Jesus wants the closeness that he has with the Father to be the same closeness that the Body of Christ has with each other and with the Father. And this is why he prays.

This prayer, like much of John's Gospel, is not found in the other synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This prayer in the Gospel of John was written much later than the other Gospels, and one could speculate the historical accuracy of these words. I think the better question is not whether Jesus said these words verbatim in his bodily form before the ascension, but perhaps if the risen Christ empowered John to write these words for the early church so that through John's writing the early church may have been reminded of Jesus' saving work among them and the importance of unity in the Body of Christ—especially during the dispersion of the church in early years across cultural differences and persecution. A prayer of protection and oneness is very fitting for the early church, but they're not the only church that needs that type of prayer. I believe as many of you may as well, that this prayer of Jesus is one that lasts beyond that one moment of the ascension and the early church followers, and generations after Jesus' life on earth as is reflected in the gospels. That prayer that they might be one, is a prayer for us today.

Jesus' prayer still is effective for our world. The desire for oneness is evident in our divisive cultures, in times of war and economic hardships, in quests for competition and control, with threats of extinction of natural habitats, in the challenges we encounter within our families, in the struggle of health and healing of heart, soul, mind, and spirit. The prayer that we might be one with God our Creator— that we may not feel distant, that we may not feel 'unworthy', that we may not feel lost, but that we would feel close with God who made us, and assured of our standing with the Divine. That's a prayer we can pray everyday.

Oneness with God is something we experience at the Eucharistic table, which we celebrate in almost every worship service together. In our Lutheran tradition we celebrate almost every worship gathering, and we believe the sacrament is a divine gift from God. There's a publication that helps understand the Practice of Word and Sacrament called, "The Use of the Means of Grace" which describes this work at the Eucharistic table. When we hear the phrase "means of Grace" it means the "ways in which God shares God's love and power". The Sacraments are a Means of Grace. This document is at the heart of the ecumenical agreement with the United Methodist Church which is entitled, "Confessing Our Faith Together: The Orderly Exchange of Ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament Principles, Policies and Procedures," developed in 2009.

We understand in the Eucharist here, about the oneness of God and how we participate in it, "At the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, God nourishes faith, forgives sin, and calls us to be witnesses to the Gospel." (p.36) We also hold true this principle that, "In this sacrament the crucified and risen Christ is present, giving his true body and blood as food and drink. This real presence is a mystery." (p.37) Among other understandings, of interest regarding Jesus' High Priestly Prayer this morning we claim, "The gathered people of God celebrate the sacrament." And "Practices of distributing and receiving Holy Communion reflect the unity of the Body of Christ and the dignity and new life of the baptized. Further, the ELCA celebrates Eucharistic Hospitality where, "all baptized persons are welcomed to Communion when they are visiting our congregations." (p.52) Likewise as we visit other Christian churches, we are welcomed to participate because of the universal nature of the church. These desires are the same in the UMC, which is anticipating full common partnership with The Episcopal Church. The UMC has approved their agreement, and we anticipate this partnership to be ratified in 2027. More and more ecumenically is where the future of the church rests.

In the united Methodists service of word and table one we have the priestly prayer reflected in the great Thanksgiving,

"By your Spirit make us one with Christ,
one with each other,
and one in ministry to all the world,
until Christ comes in final victory
and we feast at his heavenly banquet.
Through your Son Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church,
all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father,
now and forever. Amen."

These words reflect the role of the priest and you'll hear that same reflection in our liturgy today. .

Ultimately the hope at the table, and of this ecumenical agreement and of this prayer is that we might be of the same heart of Jesus as he prayed, "They may be one, as we are one" and that the same oneness be made manifest in this time, in this season, in this hour more and more. This prayer reminds me of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in chapter 3, which is also among other prayers printed in our scriptures, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. "

By God's grace, we experience oneness in the Body of Christ, and certainly that was the desire as I knelt 24 years ago asking for intercession on behalf of the church where I grew up. And might that be our prayer here as we continue in ministry together. You're probably thinking that the perfect Youth Pastor came, and he started some stuff, and everything was perfect right away, and hundreds of people just showed up and everything was great. I'm here to tell you the first meeting he had a lot of people were angry, and then he took the youth group we had and put the two together and then separated us out into small groups. And then he wanted to give us a sermon every time we were together. Whew! People were angry. Some people left, because they thought it was a bad idea.

Well, I want to tell you that even through those challenges and fighting within the church the disunity that happened, that we had a list of maybe 60-70 youth that were part of the program to begin. That

year it went to about 100, by the time a few years had passed, they had a list of 500 teens that had somehow come in and out of the walls of the church whether as a part of after-school program, or various ministries. Instead of having mission trips every other year, we had mission trips that were regularly available. I went on 5 mission trips my senior year of high school. He was able to take something and multiply it and make the church and youth ministry not about what was going on within the walls of the building, and not about what had happened in the past, but rather the people that God had yet to reach outside of the walls in the community. He made the youth ministry and later the church not about the organization itself but about God's desire for us to be in the community and to grow.

That youth pastor later was blessed to create a new campus of that same congregation. That campus is now its own freestanding church. Then a second church was born from that pastor partnering with another pastor, which is now a multicultural congregation, one of the fastest growing churches in West Ohio, because he had the vision and because God had worked through him to see beyond what had already happened, and to work alongside others to make mission possible.

I end our sermon this morning with the prayer that is prayed at the end of the Service of Word and Table in the United Methodist Church that it might be a prayer for each of us, because as we are becoming one with Christ at this table, we are sent out into the world. Receive this prayer,
"Eternal God we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit to give ourselves for others. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray." And all God's children said, Amen.