

Easter 7B – May 24, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

I John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

“Prayer, Christian prayer, is generally a very private matter. The believer goes into a [quiet room], closes the door and wrestles with God. That's a private, solitary thing.

“Yet there are times when prayer goes public. We pray here on Sunday mornings and our prayer here in church is very public...

“Today, in our Gospel we get to listen in on Jesus at prayer, his longest and most public of prayers. You can learn a great deal if you listen in on someone at prayer. What do we learn about Jesus, who says he is here to teach us all about the Father, when we listen in on what Jesus prays for?”¹

This prayer from the Gospel of John is part of Jesus' high priestly prayer, the prayer he prayed on the night before his death. We read this prayer after Ascension Day – 40 days after Easter, this year on Thursday, May 21st – because this was Jesus' prayer not only for the disciples that journeyed with him during his Earthly ministry; this is also Jesus' prayer for us disciples living today.

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There is just one part of this prayer I'd like for us to focus on today. As Jesus prayed in verse 11 of this text, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." In short, Jesus is praying for the unity of his disciples and the Church.

This issue of unity has always been a particularly vexing one for us Lutherans. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, there had only been one major church split. That Great Schism occurred in 1125 and resulted in the Eastern Orthodox Churches splitting from the Roman Catholic church.

Part of Martin Luther's reformation of the church was his realization that the unity of the church did not require the mass to be celebrated exactly the same way in all places. He said that the only thing necessary is that the Gospel be preached and the sacraments administered rightly. All the other details he called *adiaphora*, a Greek word meaning "indifferent things."

I think we all know what happened in the Protestant Reformation. No sooner had Luther been excommunicated and a new denomination based on his understanding of the Gospel began to form when many other denominations also began springing up – the Calvinists, Reformed Church, Anglicans, and Anabaptists were the earliest of these new Protestant denominations.

Perhaps in an effort to atone for the schisms brought on by the Reformation, Lutherans were world leaders in the ecumenical church movement in the 20th century, efforts to unite the various Christian denominations. This began in 1947 with the formation of the Lutheran World Federation, which unites Lutherans world-wide. Many of those who were instrumental in the formation of the LWF also helped to form the World Council on Churches in 1948.

Then the focus turned once again homeward. Almost no sooner had Lutherans landed on the shores of this country when more church splits began. Most of these splits were based on minor doctrinal differences, and surely many of those were based on what Luther would have called *adiaphora*. In the 1980s work began to unite Lutherans in the United States, culminating of the merger of the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in 1988 into our ELCA. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is now the 4th largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

Since the formation of the ELCA Lutheran ecumenical efforts have continued. The ELCA now enjoys what we call “full communion agreements” with five other Protestant denominations in the United States: the Episcopal church, the Moravian Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. This summer, at the ELCA's biennial assembly, they will be voting on a full communion agreement with the United Methodist Church. These agreements allow us to exchange clergy, partake of communion together, and partner together in mission activities.

And this finally gets us to the point of our seeking the unity of all Christians – for the sake of mission to the world. As Jesus said in verse 18 of today's reading, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” Jesus sends us out in order to proclaim the Gospel, and, as Luther said, to be “little Christs” for each other.

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So having taken a look at how our Christian church became so broken apart, and modern efforts to once again unite us in mission, perhaps it is fitting that we now take a look inward, at our own congregation, and ask ourselves: What is necessary for our unity? What sort of unity in Christ are we modeling to the world? Are we called to a deeper sort of unity?

Jesus prayed that we would be one, as he and God are one. In just a few weeks, on Trinity Sunday, you'll be exploring the relationship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinity. So not wanting to jump ahead, suffice to say for now that the sort of unity for which Jesus prayed – that we would be one as he and God are one – is an admirable goal toward which we should strive, but perhaps one we are not capable of in this life. This reality, however, should not keep us from trying.

There is an example from the animal kingdom that might be instructive for us as we seek unity:

Male emperor penguins incubate their eggs while the females travel to the ocean for food. The males crowd together in a mass of oneness, taking turns standing on the periphery of the circle to provide a barrier against the weather and keeping those on the interior warm. This oneness serves as protection from the ferocious winter storms and cold that surround them for months. This unity also makes it possible to achieve their common goal of bringing to birth a future generation. The church exhibits this kind of unity when it acts as Christ's presence in the world.²

So in what things are we, as a congregation, to model a similar sort of unity? What do we do that models Christ's presence in the world?

This congregation decided several years ago that using the same worship style, or even having a single worship service where all gathered together around Word and Sacrament, was not necessary to your unity. You decided that, for the sake of mission, you would “speak” in different worship languages in order to best reach a variety of people. This congregation now “speaks” two worship languages – one in a more contemporary format, and the other in a more liturgical form. During the summer months, you once again join together, speaking each other's worship languages every other week, for the sake of unity. In this you model Christ's presence to the world, when all can gather together as one around Word and Sacrament.

And yet, I realize that your initial decision to split into two worship services was fraught with much disagreement and probably looked more like a church split than it did an intentional effort to proclaim the Gospel in new and different ways. What grieves my heart deeply is that those disagreements from several years ago still affect the unity of this congregation. We are prevented from having the unity necessary to be the vibrant mission outpost that we are called to be.

Since this is Memorial Day weekend – when we as a nation pause to remember those who have fought to preserve the freedoms we hold dear – perhaps an illustration from military life would not be completely out of order... Let's consider, for example, a military unit. People who come from many different backgrounds – different social and economic classes, different levels of education, different family backgrounds – and yet are thrown together to perform a task. As with any group of people who is suddenly thrown together, chances are good that one member of the unit will probably not like everyone with whom he or she serves. But whether or not they like each other, there is a mission to perform. And for the sake of that mission, countless soldiers, sailors and airmen have put aside their individual differences and done the mission, all for the greater good.

This is what I am asking of you today. That for the sake of this congregation's mission and the greater good we be united. I see so much hope and promise in this place! But in order for us to accomplish the good works that God has prepared for us, we need to actively seek unity.

Unity does not mean conformity. We will continue to worship in different formats. We will continue to speak in different worship languages. As Luther said, these things are *adiaphora* where unity is concerned. Unity does not require us to be of a like mind in all things. But unity does take effort. And so, for the sake of mission, I join my prayer with Jesus, that we would be one, as he and God are one.

Amen.

[1,567 words]

¹ William Willimon, "Jesus as God" in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, Inc., 2009), 39.

² *Sundays and Seasons: Year B, 2008-2009* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 198.