

Easter 7C

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

May 16, 2010

Acts 16:16—34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12—14, 16—17, 20—21

John 17:20—26

Have you ever had someone say, “I’ll be praying for you?” I know I’ve said that to several of you just this week. Usually our prayers are for some personal concern: illness, grief, relationships, employment.

Today we’re eavesdroppers on a prayer that’s for us and our welfare, too. This entire 17th chapter of the Gospel of John is often called Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer.” Quite literally, this is our Lord’s prayer.

While every Sunday we pray another prayer called “The Lord’s Prayer,” that one might more appropriately be called “The Disciples’ Prayer.” The disciples had asked Jesus how they should pray, and he gave them a model prayer. But today we hear a part of what is our Lord’s prayer for us.

In the gospel according to John, this High Priestly Prayer occurs immediately before Jesus’ arrest. In John, Jesus is the all-knowing God-man. He knew what was to come. Several times he’d told his disciples what would happen to him. He knew that he’d be arrested, beaten, and finally put to death.

And yet, right before this horrible event, what does Jesus pray for? Does he pray for deliverance? No. He prays for us. His prayer is not only for the disciples who had traveled with him; it is for you and for me.

And what is it that Jesus prays for? Does he pray that the disciples would escape punishment for being his followers? No. Does he pray that they would be able to withstand what was to come? No. He prays for their unity. He prays that they would be able to stand together. He desires that his disciples would stand strong together as a witness to the unbelieving world. He prays that their unity would be a witness to his love, and the love of God.

How often have we prayed for unity amongst ourselves as Christians?

Since the inception of the ELCA, we as a church have been working ardently toward unity with other Christian denominations. Our being able to work collaboratively with other denominations is a witness to the love of God. Because God loves us, we are called to work together as Christians.

This work has led to many fruitful partnerships. We are currently working with other Lutheran denominations in the U.S. through Lutheran World Relief, to be God's hands and feet to people in need around the world. The ELCA has several full communion agreements with other Christian denominations. These agreements enable us to not only share clergy but to share fellowship at the Communion table. It is one of those agreements which allows us to share our Ash Wednesday worship with Flanders United Presbyterian Church.

Especially in light of Jesus' prayer for our unity as Christians, a unity that will witness to the world God's desire for all people, it is especially shameful to say that many people are opposed to this work. They think that in order for us to have shared ministries or commune at the same table, we have to have almost complete agreement on a whole lot of issues.

Does unity require uniformity? No. God created us in wonderful diversity, with a variety of gifts and interests. Surely God realized that our unity is not dependent on uniformity. There are a very few things which require uniformity in order for us to live in Christian unity.

The ELCA's work toward Christian unity is based on Martin Luther's definition of the Church. Luther said that the Church – the right hand of God active in the world – is where ever the Gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered. It's just that simple.

The Gospel is rightly preached when Christ is the center. When the message is not about what we can do for God, but what God has already done for us in Jesus.

The sacraments are rightly administered when they are given “for you” as Jesus commanded. Luther was no more explicit than that. He wasn't big on form. Exactly *how* one did things didn't matter so much, as long as they are given and received as God's saving actions toward us. This is why we are free to use bread or

wafers, wine or grape juice, by drinking from a chalice, dipping, or sipping from little cups. It's not about the form; it's about God's saving activity toward us.

But despite the amazing freedom that we have in Christ, we Christians are woefully inadequate in living in unity in the world. This lack of unity does immeasurable damage to our witness in the world. Non-believers look at the church, and see our inter-denominational squabbling and in-fighting. They rightfully question if we are paying mere lip-service to our beliefs.

Is it no small wonder, then, that on the eve of his death Jesus would pray for unity among his disciples? He rightfully understood that his people, throughout all the ages, would be judged by how well they live in unity.

Much of what I've just said also applies to the local congregation. Sometimes we Christians are our own worst enemies when it comes to being a witness to the world.

One of my favorite sayings is that the church is a wonderful institutions... too bad it's full of people. Whenever we introduce people into the equation – people who are filled with protecting their own self-interests, advancing their own agendas, or exercising power over others by the imposition of their own will – we risk wounding the witness of Christ in the world.

These baser human instincts toward self-preservation at the expense of the other are just a few of the things that we confess every Sunday morning. As it should be. Because we cannot overcome these sins which hinder our unity and Christian witness in the world – sins which may even prevent others from joining the church – until we recognize, acknowledge, and let go of them.

In his book *The Good Fight*, author Mark Buchanan uses a scene from the movie *Gladiator* to describe the necessity of unity for the church.

General Maximus comes to Rome dirty and shackled. This is not the way it's supposed to be. Where's Rome's legendary pageantry to greet one of her war heroes— the heraldry, the burnished armor, the laurel crown? Where's the honor due him?

Maximus comes as a slave.

That's the premise of the movie *Gladiator*. Through a maze of events, Maximus goes from celebrated warrior, favorite of one emperor, to despised traitor, nemesis of another. He becomes a fugitive, then caged slave, then unvanquished gladiator. His growing fame in the arena brings him to the sport's pinnacle: Rome's magnificent Coliseum to face her elite warriors.

The games open with a re-enactment of the battle of Carthage. The gladiators, all foot soldiers, are cast as the hapless Carthaginians. It is a stage

for slaughter. They are marched out a dark passageway into brilliant sunlight and met with a roar of bloodlust.

Maximus, their leader, shouts to his men: “Stay together.” He assembles them in a tight circle in the center of the arena: back-to-back, shields aloft, spears outward. Again he shouts, “Whatever comes out that gate, stay together.”

What comes out that gate is swift and sleek and full of terror. Chariot upon chariot thunder forth. War horses pull, with deadly agility and earthshaking strength, wagons driven by master charioteers. Amazonian warrior princesses ride behind and with deadly precision hurl spears and volley arrows. One gladiator strays from the circle, ignoring Maximus's order, and is cut down. Maximus shouts once more: “Stay together!”

The instinct to scatter is strong. But Maximus exerts his authority, and they resist that impulse. The chariots circle, closer, closer, closer. Spears and arrows rain down on the men's wood shields. The chariots are about to cinch the knot. Right then Maximus shouts, “Now!”

The gladiators attack, and decimate the Romans. Commodus, the evil emperor, caustically remarks to the games organizer: “My memory of Roman history is rusty, but didn't we beat Carthage the first time?”

Whatever comes out that gate, stay together.

That echoes what Jesus prayed for us: “May they be brought to complete unity” (John 17:23). And he promises that the gates of hell will not overcome his church.¹

So all this begs a number of questions for us today:

- ◆ What sort of witness are we in the world?
- ◆ Are we displaying a unity which is a reflection of the unity Jesus has with the Father?
- ◆ Are we living in the sort of unity that Jesus prays for us?
- ◆ Do we value uniformity more than we value unity?
- ◆ How often have we prayed for unity amongst ourselves as a congregation?
- ◆ Is our life together as a congregation something which points beyond ourselves to the love of God?

Someone once said that a pastor's job is not to answer questions; it is to *ask* questions.

Amen.

<1,525 words>

¹ Mark Buchanan, “The Good Fight,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2004/004/23.52.html> *Leadership Journal* (Fall 2004)
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