

Jesus Prays for Our Unity

St. Mark Lutheran
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Ascension Sunday

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"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they all may be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." John 17:20-26

There has long been a well known saying that goes like this: "United we stand; divided we fall." That probably helps explain why so many people believe our country is really in trouble today. We are divided in so many ways; we don't seem to have a common center of allegiance or beliefs that bind us together.

In our Gospel reading for this day, Jesus spoke about a unity that goes far beyond patriotism. It was the last night before Jesus was to go to the cross. He began to do for us what he is doing for us now. A few hours before his arrest, Jesus interceded in prayer for those who believed in him and those who would believe in him.

John 17 is a prayer of three sections. In verses 1-5 Jesus prays for himself. He has glorified God by accomplishing the work that God gave him to do. But as he looks ahead he knows he is going to die, and he asks, "Father, glorify me with your own presence with the glory I had with you before the world was created." (v.5)

In verses 6-19, Jesus prays for that immediate group of eleven disciples gathered around him. He knows that they are going to be filled with despair and afraid when he is arrested, falsely accused and beaten, and then crucified on a cross. True, they will know unspeakable joy when he is risen from the dead, but just about 40 days later they will stand there amazed as he disappears from sight and ascends into heaven. Jesus cares about them and he says, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one even as we are one." (v. 11)

Then in verses 20-26, he prays for all believers yet to come. He prays for their unity also. He knew that Christians needed unity if they were going to make an impact on the world, so that the world would believe that God the Father had sent Jesus his son to take away the sins of the world. So after praying for his disciples, he says, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they all may be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

A number of years ago in Canada, a little two-year-old girl wandered away from her neighborhood on a cold, winter day. Her parents alerted the neighbors and they each in their own way attempted to find the little girl. For hours the searchers went off in different directions calling her name. They didn't find her.

A little before sunset one of the men said, "Instead of all working separately, let's join hands and form a long line and walk through the fields together." That's what they did. They

joined hands and walked together and they found her little body, frozen and curled up. One of the men said with great anguish, "Oh, if we had only joined hands sooner."

These are words Christ's church should keep in mind as we do ministry today. We live in a broken world, made so because of our rebellion against God and His Law. But God in his love and mercy has provided relief and a final solution to our problems. Through proclamation of the precious Gospel, we can touch lives with the power that can transform lives today and promises an eternal life in the future. But we need to be unified; we need to be on the same page as to what the priority of the Church is. Do you know what it is?

It is interesting to note here that Jesus asked God to give unity to his church. That would seem to mean that unity is something given, not achieved by us. Jesus looked to the Father to grant his church the gift of unity. It wasn't merely a unity of organization. It's a unity generated by the Spirit of God. Christians are drawn together because they are drawn to a common center in Jesus Christ. We see that in the first words of our Gospel reading today.

That's how we see it, but the world does not see it the same way. One Methodist theologian took it upon himself to attempt to count all the different Christian denominations in the world. He came up with a count of about 1200. The world looks at that and is very confused. But we need to turn their focus to look at this as the Holy Scriptures teach us. There is only ONE holy, Christian, and Apostolic Church, and Jesus Christ is its head.

It is also interesting to note that in John 17:11 Jesus also prayed for the unity of the original disciple group. Don't think this came easily. There was often tension among the disciples, like the time when James and John asked for the seats to the right and left of Jesus when he was in heaven! Earlier on the same evening, the disciples were fuming because there was an argument among them as to who was the greatest. And there were other problems along the way. But here's the thing: despite their individual differences they were able to use the Word of God and see an unbelieving world turned upside down and churches started everywhere. That was because they were in relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They were also helped because they took seriously the words of Jesus in John 15 when he said, "This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. It is by practicing Christian love that we stick together despite some tensions and disagreements at times.

Thus, they were able to survive the crucifixion and rejoice at the resurrection. But some were going to be caught by surprise at Jesus' departure. We note in Acts 1:6 after they had come together they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" But Jesus was going to return to the Father. And he promised that the Holy Spirit would be sent upon them, to lead them and teach them and empower them to be witnesses all over the earth. Acts 1:9 reveals, "And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes., and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven.'"

_ Let us not be caught standing around either. Jesus' mission was the disciples mission and is our mission: to make it known that God the Father has sent God the Son to save those who believe. May his church, and you and I, be found faithful when our ascended Lord returns on that Great Day of the Lord. Amen.

