

*Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter / Mother's Day, 8.v.2005, 10:30 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania  
Acts 1: 6-14; Psalm 68:1-10,33-36; I Peter 4:12-14;5:6-11; John 17:1-11  
Holy Communion, LBW - Setting 2*

**J. J. !**

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and

Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

*I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom You gave me, because they are Yours. All mine are Yours, and Yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to You. Holy Father, protect them in Your Name that You have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."*

*-- John 17:9-11*

“ . . . so that they may be one, as we are one.” What would that unity as a visible, recognizable unity look like? How do we imagine it when we pray for it, as Our Lord prayed for our unity so fervently to His Heavenly Father? Whom would that unity include?

It would include, first of all, the unity of the Church, the unity in essential teaching and practice of all those who belong to God in spirit and in truth, those members of Christ's Church who truly believe and live Our Lord's teaching as we have it in the Prayer He gave us and in the Beatitudes. There will undoubtedly always be differences in church organization, patterns of worship and emphases in teaching, but, as the Augsburg Confession declares, "It

is enough for the unity of the Church that the Word of God be preached in its purity and the Sacraments administered according to their institution.” Beyond that there is also the unity of all those people of God’s First Covenant with Israel *and* of all those persons of good will, of whatever religious tradition or of none at all, who are open to God, whether they know it or not, and who act on the God-given impulse to love. All of these participate in the very life of God, in the bond of love that unites God the Father and God the Son. It is a unity that is actualized and felt more than seen. A unity about which it is better to ask those who have been in need of the love of God through the people of God and who have received that love.

And yet, this unity is not easy to achieve. In fact, it may be, like faith, impossible for us to simply will and have it so. That seems odd, for there are other kinds of unity which would seem more difficulty, but which human beings seem to manage quite well. As a pastor in Germany in 1990, I could not resist pointing this out, namely, that though Germany and the rest of Europe were overcoming political and geographic divisions of every sort, the Church of Jesus Christ was still visibly and dramatically divided.

The collapse of the Communist bloc, the fall of the Iron Curtain and the reunification of a country and a continent divided for forty years was something no one expected in the way and at the time it actually happened. It seemed like a miracle, though it took the West Germans no time at all to calculate what an expensive miracle it was likely to be. But still, if *that* kind of unity could happen, then why not *Christian* unity? Not that there are not things for which it is worth dividing the visible unity of the Church where conscience, good order and the free grace of God is at stake! But, still, it seems odd that the iron curtain of political division fell while the stained glass barriers dividing the churches even from mutual recognition remained more or less intact.

And yet, it was not for the political unity of humankind, not for 'the world' that Jesus prayed, but for those who belong to His Heavenly Father, beginning with and most principally Christians and the Church, a unity that should, where it really exists, achieve and preserve the bond of love, kindness and mercy between people in society at large. However, over and over again, where division exists in society, Christians too are divided. Think of the Church in our

own country before, during and after the American Civil War, churches divided between slavery and abolition of slavery, between the Southern Confederacy and the Northern determination to preserve the union of both North and South, by force of arms if need be. And so often, where there is class, ethnic or racial hatred, Christians, even members of the same communion, are found doing the hating and even the killing, witness the failure of Christian love to overcome brutal policies of genocide in such nearly 100% Christian countries as Germany, under National Socialism, and in the Equatorial African country of Rwanda, during the Hutu genocide of Tutsi tribal members, a plan conceived and directed by Christian university professors, a plan carried out in some cases by Christian clergy, some of them indigenous Lutheran pastors!

The unity of the Church for which Our Lord prays seems to be the exception, rather than the rule. No wonder He *prayed* for it!

Little wonder, either, that in congregations like ours, and in *this* congregation itself, we have experienced as much *dis*-unity as unity in Christ. This led some to conclude, as they said in public not yet a year ago, that 'God is no longer in this place,' that this

congregation was 'no longer a Church,' or that the pastoral office here was, for them, vacant. Some sought fellowship and in some cases membership instead as in another congregation of a sister Protestant communion. There, we pray, they have found and will continue to find the living God, His Church and her discipline and Ordinances. Though that division brings much pain to many, just to think of it, there is also reason to give thanks that the greater part of this congregation has continued to hear God's Word preached here and to receive the Means of Grace instituted by Christ with glad and determined hearts.

When divisions like this arise, we are reminded that the unity for which Christ prayed is different from the unity, uniformity or control we sometimes desire or will to create, that the true unity of the Church is itself pure grace, and not something we have built or achieved. Those who cannot find the God Who is in Christ Jesus in the proclamation of God's Word of Law and Gospel and in the Breaking of Bread can certainly not expect to find the unity for which Christ prayed, no matter where they may go. For there is the Son's

own invitation to enter into the unity and peace of His Heavenly Father.

The unity of God's people is a particular type of unity, one unlike any other. In his meditation, *The Life of Moses*, 5<sup>th</sup> Century Church Father Saint Gregory of Nyssa, called this unity *μετουσία Θεού* (= 'participation in God'). Saint Gregory was referring to the way Our Lord speaks throughout His so-called 'High Priestly Prayer' in John 17. Our Lord uses a kind of interlocking imagery to express His relation to God the Father—His 'participation' in the life of God the Father, His being, as Jesus says, 'in' the Father—and the Disciples' relation to and participation in God by being 'in' Christ. Later on, in verses 20-23, Jesus expands His intercession to include not only the inner circle of Disciples, but He prays, as He says,

*“. . . also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, . As You, Father, are in me, and I am in You, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that You have sent me. The glory that You have given me, I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and You in me, that they may become completely one in us, so that the world may know that You have sent me and have loved them even as You have loved me.*

It is thus not through any desire, plan, scheme or strategy of ours to make the world or the Church look like we want it to, but through humbly entering into the life of God as the Son invites us by grace

that we become 'one,' i.e., through our 'participation in God' by grace alone through faith, 'one' as Christ and the Father are 'one,' not as we are 'one,' left to our own choice and volition.

So, our place is not to ask ourselves, 'What are we going to do about the unity of the Church?' or 'What are we going to do about the unity of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?' or 'What are we going to do about the unity of this congregation?' Instead, it is for us to *listen* each day in prayer for the gracious invitation of the Father and the Son, and to listen for that especially *here*, on each Lord's Day and each Festival Day appointed for worship, as we are called together by the Holy Spirit around God's Word and Christ's Sacrament. It is for us to listen and to respond to a voice and an invitation we cannot hear except by the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son, a voice calling us to a unity we would otherwise not have imagined. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

*S. D. G. !*