

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, 20th.v.2007, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Bogue, Pennsylvania
Acts 16:16-34, Psalm 97, Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21, John 17:20-26
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.

Our Lord prayed to His Heavenly Father: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but 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.*"

--John 17:20-21

According to the Creed, one of the 'notes' or characteristics of the true Church of Jesus Christ anywhere and in any age is her *unity*: "I believe in *one*, holy catholic and apostolic Church . . . " In times of strife and discord within the

Congregation or within the Church on any level, this belief in the unity of the Church is indeed a matter of *faith*.

I find it appropriate that this Seventh Sunday of Easter in the Western Church Calendar, on which we hear Our Lord's prayer for the unity of the Church, has also been declared 'National Dog Bite Prevention Week' by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Dogs have of course been known to bite other dogs or even people, getting themselves and their companions into a great deal of trouble and often causing real hurt, injury and fear. When this happens, it is sometimes the result of a poor upbringing in which the dog is never taught its limits or the lesson that rough play which can escalate into a fight is not a way to have fun. A home or other environment with no rules and no one in charge is frightening to the

dog who, given half a chance, will try to learn the rules and work with the leader within the structure of the pack.

Sometimes dog fights start out of this anxiety when the dog finds herself in a new and frightening situation in which it seems there are only two things to do, either cower and flee or fight and bite. Most dogs, whose spirit has not been broken, will choose the latter. When that terrifying thing happens in a fight between two dogs, the human fear instinct tells us to shout and to try to force the dogs apart, but that is the very opposite of what actually works. The approach that actually works, though, is to speak quietly to the dogs, and especially to the dominant dog, stroking her gently until the trance of fear and rage is broken and she lets go out of trust.

The flight or fight instinct is deeply ingrained as part of the survival instinct of almost all species of living beings that swim or crawl or walk or fly on planet Earth. We humans have our own hard-wired fight or flight instinct. We have higher reason, too, which has enabled us to transcend our ancient fears somewhat and to progress in some ways beyond our fellow terrestrial beings. But, when *we* feel that we have been backed into a corner, and when *we* choose to go at our perceived enemies with all the fear and rage that is in us, it makes a dog-fight look infinitely tame by comparison.

Just look at the many attempts of one human group to exterminate another, several of them successful. In San Antonio, Texas, there is a dispute between the city, the Roman Catholic Church and the Texas association of

Native American tribes over whether the city may conduct a 'big dig' project by excavating the street in front of San Fernando Cathedral. The tribal members, pitifully few in number, are not asking for living space for themselves, but that their ancestors long dead may not have their resting place disturbed further. Here in York County, it is not living members of the Susquehannock and Algonquin nations who want to inhabit Lauxmont Farms, but their few survivors who are pleading that a place sacred in their memory be left undisturbed by so-called development. Genocide and ethnic cleansing works here at home, and not just in Turkey, Nazi-occupied Europe, Soviet Russia, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Rwanda and Darfur. If we live in fear of our own destruction by our enemies, rerunning the motion picture of this fear continually before our minds' eye for the

past half dozen years, is it not fear in the memory of our own mass destruction of two former enemies (now our allies and mentors in industrial quality control), both those under arms and those in their homes and hospitals and schools, before *they* had a chance to destroy *us*? Give me a dog fight to break up any day, and may God preserve the United Nations!

But there is more to this sad tale of lashing out in manic panic, isn't there? We followers of the Prince of Peace know a thing or two about taking each other apart limb from limb with our mutual excommunications and bans, with our persecutions and holy wars, with our invincible ignorance when it comes to trying to understand ourselves and our own history by also seeing matters through the eyes of those who parted ways with us long

ago. But, of course, without religious intolerance and barbarity there might be no Pennsylvania, dedicated to the opposite principles. A civilized tolerance is nothing to sneeze at in this world, but it is still not *unity*, still not living together and loving one another as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit do, still not what Our Lord prayed for in His high priestly prayer which we hear in today's Gospel.

Little known or appreciated because they produced no immediate and concrete results, Lutherans have sought reunification of a divided Christianity from the very beginning of our Reformation movement. Martin Chemnitz, chief author with Phillip Andraë of the *Formula of Concord* (uniting Lutherans with one another and clarifying our position against the Roman Catholics, Calvinists, Anabaptists and Spritists) initiated and carried on

an extensive correspondence with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople to see whether there might not be substantial enough agreement between the Lutherans and the Eastern Orthodox to declare some sort of mutual recognition and thus to help heal part of the terrible wound that had divided the Eastern and Western Church since the 11th Century. Though that did not happen, it resulted in, of all things, the Ottoman Turkish Sultan's decision to root for the Protestants with financial and diplomatic support for both Lutherans and Calvinists, even though he claimed to be the head of Islam. In the next century, the Orthodox Czar of Russia would invite the Lutherans to present their case to him. No union or federation with the Orthodox resulted there either, since the Czar could not understand a Church without monks, nuns and monasteries, but the

Lutherans were welcomed into Russia where churches were built for them with the same property rights as Orthodox churches. In the next century, the 18th, the Lutheran librarian, philosopher and theologian, Johannes Leibniz, succeeded in convening a conference of Lutheran and Roman Catholic scholars and churchmen at the great Abbey of Loccum to consider whether the divisions of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation might be overcome. What really is it, Leibniz ask the heads under all those powdered wigs at the conference, that we truly believe, teach and confess? How much of the faith do we share, and how does this compare to those issues on which we must still disagree? His questions were not appreciated by all, but, like those 'monads' he postulated as the most basic elements of all being, he had planted the seed of an idea.

That seed of Christian unity, of seeing the major absolute divisions of Christianity as *not* what Our Lord prayed for, but rather as a problem and as a scandal before the world, did take root throughout the 19th Century, that great age of foreign missions in which missionaries of the Lutheran, Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Methodist or other churches might find themselves working cheek by jowl with one another, not always in competition but increasingly in cooperation and mutual spiritual and even material support.

The 'Ecumenical Movement'—literally, the movement to work toward restoration of the one 'household' of faith--finally enjoyed its first real blossoming in the 20th Century. This began with the 'Faith and Order Movement' around which the World Council of Churches

was founded, always with substantial Lutheran membership and input lest the theology of the movement get sloppy. Then, in the 1960s, as many of you can remember, an unexpected door was opened by the Roman Catholic Church beginning with Pope John XXIII and the Second Council of the Vatican which he convened. Since then, bilateral national and international ecumenical dialog has been actively sustained between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Orthodox, Lutherans and Anglicans, Lutherans and Calvinists and Lutherans and the various pietist and sectarian groups such as Baptists and Methodists of various sorts. The special Vespers service this afternoon at Trinity Lutheran Church in Camp Hill, at which Lutherans, Anglicans and Catholics will be present—you, too, if you can make it up there by 3:00 p.m.—is a service

of prayer for this movement toward reconciliation, mutual understanding and, where possible, restored unity between these three major branches of Western Christianity.

I doubt that the re-union of Christ's Church will mean complete reunification, i.e., that there will ever be a return to a single church body in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of the Creeds will be one and the same. Our history has been too long and too diverse for that. It would be a tragedy also to lose those distinctive gifts of liturgy, of hymnody, of teaching and preaching and those distinctive patterns of Christian community that have evolved over many centuries in each of the major branches of Christianity, both East and West. But one thing seems much more certain today than in those dark decades in which the division of the Churches meant death, destruction

and despair for millions, and that is the firm conviction that Our Lord meant what He prayed for, that we may *all* be *one*, even as the Triune God is *one*, even here and now.

Come, Lord Jesus! ✠ 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 now and forever. ✠ Amen.

S. D. G.!