



Liturgical Day: The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Date: May 24, 2009

Title: Unity

Christ is Risen! Christ is risen, indeed!

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### The Very Last Time

Imagine, for a moment, the face of your very best friend. Now imagine that you are visiting with that friend for what you know will be the very last time. What would you say? What would your hopes be for that person? How would you tell them what you felt about them? What words would you want to be the last ones they heard you say?

A number of years ago I had the chance to spend some time with a very dear friend of mine. As a matter of fact, I've told some of you about him recently. He is the man who gave me this beautiful Easter cross. Pastor N. Eugene Larson was his name, but the people of our congregation simply called him "Parson Larson." He taught me nearly everything I know about worship and liturgy – and it was Parson Larson who helped me to fall in love with the Easter Vigil – now one of my favorite services in the church year.

The visit with him that I'm remembering took place when he was quite old, and his health had not been good for a number of years. In those days, we were both aware that every time we had the opportunity to visit with one another might be the last. We cherished those rare chances we had to get together; every time sharing words of love and support and encouragement. The last words we spoke together were always very important — words that affirmed our friendship, and wished the very best for each other.

### The Very Last Gathering with Jesus

It is a setting like that which comes to my mind when I think of today's Gospel lesson. It takes place during the last night Jesus and the twelve spend together — we call it Maundy Thursday. It is clear in St. John's Gospel that Jesus knows this is their last time together, and that the words he speaks to them at the table will be the last words he will leave with them before his suffering and death. They are important words: words that we need to take very seriously.

Jesus eats the Passover meal with his disciples, he institutes the Sacrament of Holy Communion, he washes their feet... and he prays for them. It is a long, passionate, heartfelt prayer. In his prayer, we see the deep love he has for them and for all who will eventually join them. We also see the hope he has for their future: there is so much that Jesus wants for them. He wants them to experience the joy that comes from living a life of faith. He wants them to know the comfort that comes from being in relationship with God. He wants them to understand the responsibility they have for ministry — the responsibility that belongs to all who are part of a community of faith.

But above all, he wants them to experience unity. He wants them to know with each other the same unity that he has with God the Father. So he prays that they might be one, just as he and the Father are one. Now it doesn't take a very long look at today's church to make you wonder if his hope is being realized. The Christian church has more than its share of divisions – perhaps even more so than in the general population. We disagree on moral issues. We disagree on theological principles. We disagree on public policy. You can find passionate Christians on just about every side of every issue. But the

reality is this: as much as we might find to disagree about, there is far more that unites us.

FIRST LESSON

ACTS 1:15-17, 21-26

PSALM

PSALM 1

SECOND LESSON

1<sup>ST</sup> JOHN 5:9-13

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. JOHN 17:6-19

PRAYER OF THE DAY

GRACIOUS AND  
GLORIOUS GOD, YOU  
HAVE CHOSEN US AS  
YOUR OWN, AND BY THE  
POWERFUL NAME OF  
CHRIST YOU PROTECT US  
FROM EVIL. BY YOUR SPIRIT  
TRANSFORM US AND YOUR  
BELOVED WORLD, THAT  
WE MAY FIND OUR JOY IN  
YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST,  
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD,  
WHO LIVES AND REIGNS  
WITH YOU AND THE HOLY  
SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW  
AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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God's work. Our hands.

## **The Gift of Christian Unity**

We are united in the love that God desires to share with us. We are united in the grace we receive through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are united in the meal that we receive and in the word that we proclaim. We are united in the mission God has entrusted to us. We are united in our hope for a world in which all people know God's love. This unity is what gives us strength and hope and peace.

This gift of unity that we have in Christ is an important part of what it means to be God's family, because being a faithful person isn't an easy task. Our surroundings make it a difficult thing to do. The majority of our neighbors and co-workers do not share the faith that you and I hold. The direction of our society is often pulling us in other directions than our faith calls us. Our children are facing decisions in their early teens that many of us didn't have to face until we were ten years older than them.

Life can be a challenging proposition. As disciples of Jesus, we are asked to live the kind of lives that make witness to his presence. So we struggle with the difficult tasks of raising a family, or remaining virtuous at work or holding to one's convictions in social settings. And were we to have to do it alone, we likely would fail.

But Jesus prays for his disciples, and he continues to pray for you and me today. Praying that we will never have to face the complexities of life alone. Praying that the unity we experience, those of us who are members of his family, will be as deep and as intimate and as sustaining as the unity that Jesus has with God the Father. Jesus knows that when we are united to one another in faith we find a storehouse of support and encouragement — as we eat together, study together, serve together, laugh together and pray together. And in doing these things as a community, we find that no hurdles we face are insurmountable, because we are united in the Spirit, and bonded to one another in Christ.

## **Our Church Was Our Strength**

This past week, I heard the story of a family that experienced an incredible series of difficult events. It all started when the husband lost his job. For weeks he tried to find another job — but was unable. He was too qualified for some positions, and not qualified enough for others. As the rejection letters came, one after another, he became more and more disheartened. She continued to work, and was able to keep their heads above water... but just barely. They had come to depend on those two incomes, and just couldn't seem to make it on one. Then one day, the bottom dropped out. She was in an automobile collision, and had to take a leave from work. Between the hospital bills and her loss of income, it was a devastating experience.

"It might have broken up our family," she later said, "except for one thing — our support group at church." They had been meeting weekly with three other couples for a number of years. And the worse things got for them, the more that small group of loving friends surrounded them, and supported them, and helped them through that difficult time. When it was all over, he said, "When my wife was in the hospital, our church family formed such a tight circle around us that we were unable to fall."

## **A Unity Like No Other**

It's that kind of unity that Jesus prayed for the last time he ate with his disciples. And it's that kind of unity that Jesus wants to be a part of our congregation — and every other congregation that seeks to be faithful to his word.

We live in a world that is preoccupied with division: rich / poor, male / female, educated / unlearned, conservative / liberal, these kinds of labels abound. And there are even times when we, as Lutherans, become more aware of what divides us than what unites us. How do we understand matters of sexuality? What is the best strategy to reduce abortions? What forms of worship should we embrace? There are times when we seem far more interested in those things that divide us.

And so this text comes as a breath of fresh air. It reminds us that in Christ, that which unites is far greater than that which divides. Through the faith that we share, and the presence of God that lives in our midst, the Lord works a unity among us that nothing can destroy. And in that unity, we find great strength: strength that empowers us to be God's faithful people. So let us approach this table today, leaving behind our

differences, and united in the One who loves us so deeply: deeply enough to die for us. Because only when we center our community around his love are we able to become the church he wants us to be.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (May 24, 2009)

Gospel Lesson; English Text: <sup>i</sup>

<sup>17:6</sup> “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup> for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. <sup>13</sup> But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. <sup>14</sup> I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>15</sup> I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup> They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup> And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. <sup>ii</sup>

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

<sup>17:6</sup> Ἐφάνέρωσα σου τὸ ὄνομα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις οὓς ἔδωκας μοι ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου. σοὶ ἦσαν καμοὶ αὐτοὺς ἔδωκας καὶ τὸν λόγον σου τετήρηκαν. <sup>7</sup> νῦν ἐγνώκαν ὅτι πάντα ὅσα δέδωκας μοι παρὰ σοῦ εἰσιν. <sup>8</sup> ὅτι τὰ ῥήματα ἔδωκας μοι δέδωκα αὐτοῖς, καὶ αὐτοὶ ἔλαβον καὶ ἐγνώσαν ἀληθῶς ὅτι παρὰ σοῦ ἐξήλθον, καὶ ἐπίστευσαν ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας. <sup>9</sup> Ἐγὼ περὶ αὐτῶν ἐρωτῶ, οὐ περὶ τοῦ κόσμου ἐρωτῶ ἀλλὰ περὶ ὧν δέδωκας μοι, ὅτι σοὶ εἰσιν, <sup>10</sup> καὶ τὰ ἐμὰ πάντα σὰ ἐστίν καὶ τὰ σὰ ἐμὰ, καὶ δεδόξασμαι ἐν αὐτοῖς. <sup>11</sup> καὶ οὐκέτι εἰμὶ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ εἰσιν, καγὼ πρὸς σὲ ἐρχομαι. πάτερ ἅγιε, τήρησον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι σου ᾧ δέδωκας μοι, ἵνα ὡσιν ἐν καθῶς ἡμεῖς. <sup>12</sup> ὅτε ἤμην μετ’ αὐτῶν ἐγὼ ἐτήρουν αὐτοὺς ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι σου ᾧ δέδωκας μοι, καὶ ἐφύλαξα, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐξ αὐτῶν ἀπώλετο εἰ μὴ ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας, ἵνα ἡ γραφὴ πληρωθῇ. <sup>13</sup> νῦν δὲ πρὸς σὲ ἐρχομαι καὶ ταῦτα λαλῶ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἵνα ἔχωσιν τὴν χαρὰν τὴν ἐμὴν πεπληρωμένην ἐν ἑαυτοῖς. <sup>14</sup> ἐγὼ δέδωκα αὐτοῖς τὸν λόγον σου καὶ ὁ κόσμος ἐμίσησεν αὐτοὺς, ὅτι οὐκ εἰσιν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου καθῶς ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου. <sup>15</sup> οὐκ ἐρωτῶ ἵνα ρῆς αὐτοὺς ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου, ἀλλ’ ἵνα τηρήσης αὐτοὺς ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ. <sup>16</sup> ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου οὐκ εἰσιν καθῶς ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου. <sup>17</sup> ἀγίασον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ· ὁ λόγος ὁ σὸς ἀλήθεια ἐστίν. <sup>18</sup> καθῶς ἐμὲ ἀπέστειλας εἰς τὸν κόσμον, καγὼ ἀπέστειλα αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν κόσμον. <sup>19</sup> καὶ ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἐγὼ ἀγιάζω ἑμαυτὸν, ἵνα ὡσιν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἡγιασμένοι ἐν ἀληθείᾳ. <sup>iii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx>.

<sup>ii</sup> St. John 17:6-19, New Revised Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iii</sup> St. John 17:6-19, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).