

John 17:20-26
Easter 7C + June 2, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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One

The Word of the Lord from John 17:22-23: Jesus said to His Father, "The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, one last time for the season: He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

He is risen indeed *and ascended* on high to rule over all things for your good. And for this final Sunday of the Easter season, we have this Gospel lesson which is really rather profound. I will be up front that this is sort of an egghead sermon. But it's an important egghead sermon, so I'm going to go for it.

You may not be aware of this, but The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod has a reputation of being somewhat ... persnickety about doctrine and practice. We're rather committed to what we believe, teach and confess, and this appears in various parts of church practice – perhaps most obviously and uncomfortably in our practice of closed communion. Doctrinal persnickiness is not popular among many Christians today, and so I field a fair amount of criticism that in the big picture of the Christian Church on earth, we in the LCMS do not play well with others. I'm told that we appear to be divisive, as if we believe we're the only ones who are going to heaven.

The criticism saddens me. I mean, I'll be the first to admit that we're persnickety in doctrine, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. I'd like to explain; and, in doing so, I would like to make a couple of assertions that may sound outrageous.

First, I am going to say that there is no Christian church body more interested in unity than ours. There might be others *as* interested, but none *more* interested. Second, I am going to say that there is no Christian church body that is more ecumenical than ours.

Both of these statements will sound outrageous to many, so I'd best explain.

First, there is no Christian church body that is more interested in unity than ours. The Lord desires that His Church be one – He prays for it in our Gospel lesson, and we commit ourselves to this every Sunday in the Creed when we say, "I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church." We keep stating publicly that there is not – and ought not be – a bunch of different Christian churches, but only one. The question then is this: what makes the Church to be one? What brings unity to the Church on earth?

In general, there are two paths to unity. One is full agreement in doctrine, and the other is agreement through compromise.

We believe that unity in the Church is achieved by means of full doctrinal agreement. To be united as the Christian Church is to be united in what we believe, teach and confess – to be united in the Word of God. Therefore, the path to unity is to sit down, discuss with others where we disagree, examine the Scriptures together, see who is teaching correctly according to the Word of God, and repent if we've strayed. That's a monumental task in itself, but it's only part of the challenge. Before determining who is teaching correctly according to the Word of God, one must first establish a common understanding of *what* the Word of God is, and *how* one is going to interpret it. This triples the challenge, at least.

There is a danger to this approach to unity, and it is that we might start to consider negotiable things to be non-negotiable, "our way or the highway" on matters that don't matter. We must always take care to insist only on what Scripture says. If we say more than that and rob people of Christian freedom, then we have become a sect. Good Lord, preserve us.

Nevertheless, we seek unity by full agreement in the Word. Read through the Augsburg Confession sometime: it is not written to poke the Pope in the eye and say, "We're better than the Catholics are." It's written to say that we desire to resolve differences on the basis of Scripture so that there might be one visible Church on earth. Considering how much more Christianity has fragmented since then, the endeavor seems only more futile. It would take a miracle for this unity to be achieved on this side of heaven, and the problem only seems to be getting worse. Still, we continue: we say what we believe according to the Word of God, and we are happy to discuss this with whoever is willing.

Many consider this a lost cause; and really, who can blame them? Thus, they propose the other route, which is unity through compromise – agreeing to disagree. The basis for unity here is what all Christians have in common, and everything else becomes optional. We might use the analogy that the Christian faith is like a new car that you're ordering to your specifications: an engine and a transmission are required, but leather seats and a satellite radio are nice, but unnecessary, choices. In the "unity-through-compromise" strategy, all doctrinal disagreements must be considered options, and options are no longer necessities. If some believe in infant baptism and some do not, baptizing infants is, by definition, an unnecessary option. If some believe that the Holy Communion is Christ's body and blood, and some do not, then Christ's presence in the Supper is an unnecessary option.

This has its attractions: for one, the greater the compromise, the greater the number of churches that are inside the tent. For another, it can be accomplished without miraculous intervention. But there's danger in this approach, too: it says that unity is accomplished, and truth is established, by what sinners (!) can manage to agree about. As time goes on, they agree on less and less; and so the compromise becomes greater and greater.

So go the two routes to church unity. Of the two, we seem to have "the impossible" and "the possible;" and being pragmatic, people normally opt for the possible. However, the better question is this: which route is the way of Christ?

When Jesus prays in John 17, He prays this His people be one, *perfectly* one, as He and His Father are one. As one, the Father and the Son have not agreed to disagree: as two persons of the one true Godhead, they are of one mind, one will and one Word. If we are to be one in Christ as Father and Son are one, *perfectly* one, then we are to be one in His Word.

See, if one church body declares that we should baptize babies, and another declares that we should not, only one of them agrees with Jesus. Only one of them is saying what Jesus says in His Word, and what the other is saying is not what Jesus says in His Word. This is so very important because the Holy Spirit works through the Word of God to give forgiveness, faith and salvation: that is the glory that Jesus prays for the Father to give His people. In praying that they be one, together in Him, He is praying for their salvation! Think this through logically: the more of God's Word that you lose for the sake of compromise, the less the Holy Spirit has to work with. And given the constant attacks of the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh, don't you want the Holy Spirit to have as much as possible to work with to forgive your sins and strengthen your faith?

This is why we stick with the hard way, unity through full agreement in the Word of God. This is not a Lutheran invention: Scripture makes it clear, and we see this evident in the early Church. In the first centuries of the Christian Church, believers were not united. Along with orthodox believers, you also

had Monophysites, Eunomians, Novations, Arians and more. All of these groups agreed that "Jesus is Lord;" and all of them said that they must resolve their differences before acting like they were united.

So here we stand, pursuing unity the hard way. Our message to our fellow Christians should never be, "Only Lutherans are going to heaven." It should always be, "Come, let us reason together."

Quickly, then, my second outrageous assertion: there is no Christian church body that is more ecumenical than ours. This sounds absurd to many, since we stand outside of the Ecumenical Movement, which is all about unity through compromise. However, we are ecumenical in this respect: we joyfully believe that wherever the Word of God is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is at work to save. Wherever the Holy Spirit is at work, there will be believers – there will be the Church. Thus, far from saying that only Lutherans are going to heaven, we rejoice that there are believers in all sorts of churches, regardless of the name on the sign. In some church bodies, the doctrine of the church may heavily conflict with Scripture: but where the Gospel is proclaimed, despite the shroud of man's inventions, the Holy Spirit is at work to save. And even as Christ died for our sinful deeds, He has also died for our wrong beliefs. The one who repents of his sins, known and unknown, and trusts that Jesus is the Son of God who died to redeem him, will be forgiven the doctrine that he's gotten wrong. Thanks be to God!

Where the Word is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is at work to save. We rejoice in that Scriptural truth. That's what I mean when I say that there is no Christian church body more ecumenical than we are. There may be some that are as ecumenical, but none more so; because you cannot be more ecumenical than this and still be a Christian church. On the other hand, there are many who are less ecumenical: we have fellow Christians in other churches who believe both that we think we're the only ones going to heaven *and* believe that we are *not* going to heaven. Trust me: I get the mail around here.

My egghead sermon and on Christian unity draws to a close. You are going to be tempted to be ashamed of refusing to compromise what we believe; and when this shows up in practice like closed Communion, you're going to find it uncomfortable at times. But remember why we are persnickety: it is not because we are aloof, elitist snobs. It is because we desire that the Church be one in Christ, as Christ is one with His Father. I earnestly look forward to the Last Day when the great miracle takes place and the Church is visibly one before the throne in heaven.

Until then, hold fast to His Word without compromise. This Word proclaims Christ, who has joined you to Himself by Holy Baptism; who feeds you Himself in His Supper; and strengthens your faith by His holy Word. By that Word, Christ gives us grace and unites us in Him; and in that Word, He tells us that "There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). God grant you His grace – the glory that Christ has won by His death for you – so that you might be forgiven and one in Him, and with one another, unto life everlasting.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen