

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
St. John 17:20-26

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Did you hear Him? Jesus Christ mentioned you in today's gospel. Hear Him again: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word..." He prayed not only for His disciples, His Twelves—"I do not ask for these only," He said—but also for those who hear His disciples' words—"but also for those who will believe in me through their word," He continued. You, dear hearers, are prayed for by Christ. Soak that in for a bit.

[short time for reflection]

So, by now, you are probably wondering, what is He praying for you to have or to be. "[T]hat they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us..." He prays for one-ness. Be careful, this is not merely unity, as in a bunch of individuals getting together, but union, as in many becoming one. And this, not only a union of people into some mere organization that is called the church, but one-ness in God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Take a little time to ponder that, too.

[short time for reflection]

Now, this one-ness, this union, is a one-ness in God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. For Christians, Lutherans especially, I imagine, theological signals should be going off when one-ness in Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is mentioned. This sounds like Holy Baptism, and it is. It also sounds like a wedding, and there's some relation there, too. Baptism is entrance into the Bride of Christ. In Baptism—water combined with the word and command of God—the Triune God claims the baptized and unites them with Himself; they are grafted into the True Vine, made a part of it, made one with it. You and I are incorporated with Christ—incorporated: from the Latin meaning *brought into the body*—and that Body of Christ is the Church.

It is this union that Paul recognizes when he writes to the church in Corinth, "Now you are the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27), and to the church in Rome, "[S]o we, though many, are one body in Christ..." (Romans 12:5) It is this union that Paul speaks of when he wrote to the churches in Galatia, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

But this union goes beyond only union with God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Baptism is not only the means by which you are brought into the Body of Christ, the Church; not only the means by which you are given forgiveness and life and salvation. It also makes each one of you one with each other. Baptism is what you have in common with each other; it is where you are bound to each other—it's that "blest tie that binds," as has been sung many times here; each of you, Baptized and believing, are bound to each other, who are also Baptized and believing. Certainly, this one-ness is celebrated in the Lord's Supper—where one-ness in confession is expressed—but it is created at Baptism. You are joined, each to another, in your Baptisms, made one as the Father and the Son are one with the Holy Ghost.

Here it is, as Paul continued in his first letter to the church in Corinth, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it," and more clearly again to the church in Rome, "[S]o we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."

Now, let me back up. This one-ness and union that Jesus expresses in His prayer is a one-ness with God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. It is not merely a unity into an organization that is called the church.

A concern you might have with that concerns different denominations (a fancy word that can mean divisions) and confessions in Christianity today (and that have existed since Christianity began). Even within denominations and church bodies there are divisions: there are confessionals and liberals, those who use the historic liturgies and those who abandon them, those who fall on one side of a controversy or the other (or somewhere in between), and so on and so forth. Even within this little

congregation I dare say that there are divisions: maybe there are those who would prefer we stick to singing out of TLH and those who don't mind the hymn or service from LSB, or maybe some find value in the various Bible and Theology Studies and those who would only rather come for the Divine Service on Sunday (that's not to say anything of those who can only come on Sunday)? Knowing of all of these divisions, no matter how small, you might begin to wonder about the efficacy of Christ's prayer or even doubt Him.

I will begin by saying this: God, in his infinite wisdom, grace, and mercy, does not force His will on you. Certainly, He could force His will, and you and I would all be one in every matter conceivable, true union and unity. Such a time will come when God's will will reign supreme as He will have gathered the church to live in His eternal presence, everyone will be of one mind and one will. Until that time, however, He does not force His will, but gives His grace and faith when and where He pleases. While you live here "below," you still struggle with your own will and inward tendencies, and one of those is the tendency to divide.

Oh sure, man likes to create that which he proclaims as unity. One group will get together with another—one church will proclaim fellowship with another—when no true unity exists. Two people will join for one reason or another, from as simple as a friendship, or a common goal, to as grand and sanctified as a marriage, but even here, unity is superficial and unions can be strained. Friendships are fragile unities that are quickly and easily broken. And marriage?... "A threefold cord is not quickly broken," you may like to quote about marriage from Ecclesiastes (cf. 4:12); but notice that it does NOT say that a threefold cord can never be broken. Even here (or at any congregation), though all of you are united and joined as one with each other, you still have and hang on to your inward, often-divisive tendencies; so no two people will get along perfectly, even in a Christian congregation, and some might be prone to break away from their local fellowship if they are offended, even over the smallest thing. Rev. Bill Cwirla once wrote,

The sins we commit against each other are a grit that grinds at the gears of our relationships. You can't put a bunch of sinners into a room, even justified ones, and order them to be perfectly united as one. Perhaps you could get a majority, or even a consensus, but there would always be a leftover minority somewhere.

Everyone is responsible for the hurt caused to others with whom they associate. Furthermore, you are each victims of the hurt caused by others with whom you associate. Man likes to hang on to his labels, no matter how insignificant, and he damns those who do not agree with him or join with him under that banner. So, you sin against each other and the unity you are supposed to have and, therefore, sin against God.

So, it only stands to reason that you will encounter all kinds of divisions, even in Christendom, on this side of eternity. There are and will continue to be different church bodies, confessions, denominations, and even congregations within these denominations that can agree on a great number of points, but differ perhaps in only one or two small issues, but these are still issues that divide. Or, there's the grander scale of holding to a completely different confession or even subtle differences in the interpretation of Scripture—issues that, without a doubt, will divide.

This leads, inevitably, to people, even within Christian congregations, who hold to completely false and damnable doctrines. I speak not only of false religions, such as Mormonism or Islam, etc., but also of people who are often called False Christians. This is why Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized." (1 Corinthians 11:19)

This is exactly what Jesus, Himself, said in this morning's Gospel:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all 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. 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.** [emphasis added]

Once again, in His infinite wisdom, grace, and mercy, God allows factions and divisions, allows heterodoxy and false religions, that the truth may be brought to light. He used the problem of the Arian heretics in the 300s—who taught the Second Person of the Trinity was created, not begotten—to proclaim the truth put forth in what you confess today as the Nicene Creed. He used the problem of indulgences to proclaim the truth put forth in the Augsburg Confession (and all the Lutheran Confessions found in the Book of Concord). Out of division, God brings unity, so that the truth may be known, that the world may know that the Father has sent the Son because He loves His creation, and in His truth, **He** creates true unity and union.

And so, Jesus prays, “[T]hat they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us...” It’s back to the one-ness Jesus prays for. Not only does He pray for it, but He brings it about. He uses divisions and heresy to bring to light the truth, calling Christians to the one-ness found in that truth. He brings individuals into unity and one-ness with other believers through the waters of Holy Baptism, joining them to Himself, incorporating them into His Body, and also joining them to each other. You are each joined to all Christians through Christ. You are joined to each other out of the love that God has for you, His most cherished creation.

This union works beyond and in spite of the unity you may try to create yourselves and the divisions you enhance among yourselves. In other words, in Christ you are joined to those you would not otherwise be joined to. This union crosses so many lines and borders you would never imagine crossing yourselves to find unity. For in Christ, you can be united to one who would be a cultural enemy, such as an enemy of the state. In Christ, you can be united to one who would be opposed to you politically. In Christ, you can be united to one who would be a social adversary, such as a Rockies fan to a Dodgers fan, or an Avalanche fan to a Flames fan, or a Broncos fan to a Chiefs fan. These all, and others, can be united in Christ, finding themselves joined to the one-ness of God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—fully incorporated into the body of Christ confessing that which He calls sin and receiving the forgiveness from that sin and a holy desire to live a life apart from that sin (and others), all out of a love of God that desires for you all His blessings and grace.

Therein lies the reason for the union that Jesus prays for. Jesus prayed,
Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me
where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me
before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the
world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent
me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it
known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I
in them.

In other words, you cannot be where Christ is now, ascended to the right hand of God, unless you are joined to Him, unless you are in union with Him. And then, being in union with Him, you receive all the gifts that He gives in His Word, which He Himself came to give, because you are in union with Him in all that He has done and is still doing. This is what Jesus means when He says, “that they may become perfectly,” or completely, “one”—it is the perfection or completion He refers to. It is as Rev. Cwirla again wrote,

The desire of Jesus’ prayer for union is that we be with Him where He is.
That’s a package deal. He wants us to be with Him in His death, in His
resurrection, in His ascended glory.

You, dear Baptized, still living in that Baptismal promise, have been united with Christ, you have been joined to Him. In Christ you died, in Him you live, in Him you reign, in union with Father and the Holy Ghost, **one** forever, forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.