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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Easter 7, Series A
Saturday, May 27th, 2017
Sunday, May 28th, 2017 (Memorial Weekend)

Sermon: That We May Be One

Text: John 17:1-11

Focus: Jesus prays for the Church.

Function: That we would be one in Christ.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (SC, 3rd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps. 133:1, ESV).¹ That is the first verse of Psalm 133 and also, incidentally, the first words in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous book about the Church’s life together in Christ. And it’s true! How wonderful—how “good and pleasant”—it truly is when there is harmony and peace in our families, churches, schools, and communities. If you grew up in a dysfunctional family divided by bitterness, resentment, or fear and then married into a family full of joy and love, you know how blessed you finally are. Or if you have ever been part of a congregation divided by heresy, jealousy, or unrepentant sinners, you know how destructive that can be to your

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

spirit and the Church's witness. I myself experienced extremely painful conflict at another church, and it caused me to doubt my faith.

Jesus, of course, knows all of this, which is why he prayed for the unity of the first disciples. In our Gospel lesson Jesus asks, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, *that they may be one*, even as we are one" (John 17:11). Jesus prayed "that they may be one"—that the Church would be united in Jesus' name. Later in John 17, Jesus continues this theme and prays "that they may become *perfectly* one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (John 17:23). The unity of Jesus' followers is a powerful testimony to our faith. No wonder that Tertullian reports how the pagans used to marvel about the early Christians, "See how they love one another!"

Tragically, that is not what the world usually says about the Church today. Instead, I hear unbelievers claim that all the Church does is fight and ask for money! There are more than 25,000 distinct Christian denominations in the world today (some estimates put it higher than 35,000). Some of these differences are geographic or ethnic. For

example, when Lutherans first came to America, they tended to gather in separate Synods for Germans, Swedes, Danes, Finns, and Norwegians. Occasionally, there was even the oddball English-speaking Lutheran congregation! Yet just as there are doctrinal differences between the major Lutheran church bodies today, so there are also 31 different flavors of Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others. Christians have historical disagreements about all kinds of doctrines, including Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the papacy, purgatory, and the Virgin Mary—just to name a few! Wars have been fought because of religious differences.

More recently, we are divided over how to interpret the Scriptures, the role of women in the church, creation vs. evolution, and whether or not homosexuality is a sin. What a terrible witness! Sadly, we have come a long way from the early church in Jerusalem, which Luke describes as being “with one accord” (Acts 1:14).

No wonder, then, that the ecumenical movement gained so much traction during the last century. Early in the twentieth century, various Christian movements and denominations began meeting together to sort

out their differences and seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the Church around the world. For, as we confess in the Creed, we are “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” Perhaps we should start *acting* like it!

Theological dialogue is important. It’s good to listen to those who disagree with you and believe differently than you. It’s also good to be able to give an answer for the reason for the hope that is in you (1 Pet. 3:15). “Yet,” as Peter wrote in last week’s epistle, “do it with gentleness and respect.” Yet even open, honest, respectful dialogue about our differences will not solve all our problems. The false premise of the ecumenical movement (and the World Council of Churches) is that the whole enterprise is based on *our* efforts, the compulsion that it’s up to *us* to unify the Church, that we ourselves have the resources and responsibility to make ourselves one. And, unfortunately, when human effort becomes the basis for our unity, we are tempted to smooth over doctrinal differences and pretend they are unimportant, despite numerous Biblical warnings against false teaching and false teachers.

This attitude drove my father crazy when, during the late 1990's, his denomination, a more liberal Lutheran church body, entered into fellowship agreements with the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. How, my father wondered, could Lutheran churches open their pulpits and altars to Christians who denied the Real Presence of Jesus' body and blood in the Lord's Supper, or who wrongly agreed with Calvin's teaching on double predestination that God doesn't desire to save all people? Dad also took great offense at the idea of apostolic succession put forth by Catholics and Episcopalians that unless a pastor or priest is ordained by a bishop consecrated by a bishop who was consecrated by a bishop who was consecrated by another bishop going all the way back to the original apostles, then their ordination is invalid and their ministry suspect. When Episcopal bishops insisted on re-consecrating Lutheran bishops in his Church, my father had a fit and sent letters of protest to his church leaders—and rightly so, I might add!

The mantra of the ecumenical movement is Jesus' words, "that they may be one" (John 17:11). Those words are misquoted over and over again. Yet we must not overlook that a unity that is only

organizational, and not based on agreement in doctrine, is a false unity. As Jesus himself prays later: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). Without unity in doctrine, there can be no outward unity. The so-called “unity” of the ecumenical movement is a sham at best and a self-deceiving lie at its worst. As St. Paul writes, “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).

I am not so arrogant as to say that Lutherans have everything figured out and everybody else is wrong. I think there is a great deal we can learn from other Christians in other denominations, including the Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and others. I also happen to believe they have a lot to learn from us. I am a Lutheran by choice, not by chance, because I believe that we have the best answers to the questions that have been asked about the Bible throughout Christian history. However, I do not think we have all the answers. Nor do I believe that we will be the only

people in heaven! All believers in Christ, regardless of denomination, will be part of the heavenly choir.

But that doesn't mean differences don't matter. Differences *do* matter because *doctrine* matters. According to the Apostle Paul, doctrine *saves*: "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16). That is why outward unity must be predicated upon unity in doctrine—agreement in the Scriptures.

Still, we must humbly admit that we cannot make ourselves one. We do not "achieve" unity. Only Jesus can make us one. That's why he prays, "Holy Father, keep them in your name..., that they may be one, even as we are one" (John 17:11). Jesus wants us to be one just as the life of the Triune God is One. He unites his Church by praying for her, teaching his Word, and dying for her. He makes us one by giving his life *for* the Church. We are united to one another when we are united to Christ and his Word in Holy Baptism. And so, like all good things, the Church's unity is a gift from God.

Jesus' high priestly prayer is all about gifts. God gives gifts to Jesus, who gives to us (his disciples), who give to the world. God loves to give good gifts—"every good and perfect gift is from above" (Jas. 1:17). So the Father gives authority (John 17:2), his Word (v. 8), his name (v. 11), and the disciples (vv. 6, 9) to Jesus. Jesus then gives (speaks) the Word to us (v. 8), the same Word that we then speak in our witness to the world (vv. 18, 20, 23). The greatest gift of all the salvation one for us by Jesus on the cross: eternal life in his name. As Jesus says, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Ultimately, our unity comes from believing in Jesus and saying the same words Jesus and the Father say. In fact, that is what it means to confess the faith. "Confess" is a Latin word that means to "say together." In turn, the Latin *confessio* comes from a Greek word (*homologeō*), which means "to say the same things." No wonder, then, that Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). Disciples of Jesus pray and study the Scripture together, for that is how the Lord makes us one.

Jesus prays for the unity of the Church. So do we. Will you pray with me? Let's say an "echo" prayer like I do in the children's message.

Lord Jesus... make us one... as You and the Father are one... End our divisions... and unite us in Your Word... In Jesus' name, Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*