

23 May 2004
Easter 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“One in Christ”

Text: John 17:20-26 (Rev 22:12-17, 20)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Its good to know that someone is praying for you, isn't it? Even unbelievers, I've found, appreciate it when I tell them I'm praying for them. They may not think it will do any good, but if they have a problem, or if they are struggling – hey, why not have all your bases covered? . . . There's just something about someone praying for you. They care enough to take the time. They're bringing you and your need before the throne of God in Heaven. You're not in this alone.

Today we heard Jesus praying for us. The Son of God Himself, praying for us. And this is something that Jesus did not stop doing after His resurrection and ascension, but that, the Scriptures tell us, He is still doing. (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25) Always doing. Praying for us. Bringing us and our every need before His Father in Heaven. You are never forgotten. There may be people and things that *we* forget to pray for; *we* may give up in our prayers when things don't seem to be turning out; *we* may let other priorities shove our prayers aside – but not Jesus. His prayers never fail. . . . And so it is in the Holy Gospel that we heard. Even though He is about to be arrested and face the terror of bearing our sin and being forsaken by His Father on the cross and having the punishment for our guilt crush Him, Jesus prays for us. At such a time as this, it must be a pretty important prayer!

And so what is Jesus praying for us here? ***“That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you have sent me.”***

Jesus prays for unity. Unity among those who believe in Him through the message of the apostles. This is something that we should be praying for as well. At last count there were over 2,000 different Christian denominations. Catholics and Protestants. Different kinds of Catholics, different kinds of Protestants. Different kinds of Lutherans. Even divisions within our own Synod. And it is not to be. These divisions are sad, and they are sinful, and they are not to be. It seems we are a far cry from Jesus' prayer. . . . Jesus prays for unity for His Church, and I'm sure, He is still praying for this. And therefore so

should we.

But we need to be clear here – what *exactly* is Jesus praying for in the words of His prayer that we heard tonight? And therefore what is it that we are to be praying for? I used the word “unity” before *for simplicity*, but the actual words that Jesus used are “***that they may all be one***.” Technically speaking, Jesus does not want us simply to be united – He wants us to be one. And there is a difference between those two things. You can be united without being one. There are degrees of being united; but there are no degrees of oneness. You either are, or you are not, one.

Perhaps a way to think about that is with the way we see marriages taking place in our world today. I attended the wedding of Scott and Amy yesterday as they were united by God – but not simply united, but even more and greater than that, **they were made one**. They were made one flesh by God. . . . On the other hand, marriage is seen by many today as a simple uniting of two people – they don’t even have to be different sexes anymore! Because they’re not really being made one, they’re simply uniting, for a while, until they choose not to be united anymore, at which time they simply go their own way, and maybe try it again with someone else. . . . But while those who are united can eventually be disunited, you can’t divide one. Any other number (above zero, above nothing) can be divided and you’ll have whole groups. But you can’t divide one. If you do, you don’t again have wholes, you have pieces.

Now I use that marriage example on purpose, because when Christ prays for His Church, He’s not praying for an organization, or a Synod, or a beaurocracy – He’s praying for His bride. And He’s praying not for mere unity with her, but for oneness. Oneness between Himself and His bride. A oneness that cannot be divided. A oneness that can only be accomplished by God.

You see, that is why all of *our* attempts at unity fail. Perhaps they succeed for a while, but unless we are truly *made one by God*, what is merely united is later often disunited by sin. And not just marriages in our world today, but attempts at church unity. In the early church – and yes, there was disunity even back then! – they first tried to achieve unity by force. Today, being somewhat more sophisticated and knowing that force isn’t going to work, many have gone to the opposite extreme and try to achieve unity by being nice and loving, and when our differences come up, just look the other way and pretend that these differences don’t really matter. . . . But neither “shotgun weddings” nor marriages based on “puppy love” last very long. It is not this kind of unity for which Jesus prays. He prays, “***that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.***”

This is a marriage made in Heaven, because it can *only* be made in Heaven! It can only

be done by God. And so just as a man and a woman come before the altar of God and pray for Him to make them one – truly one, perfectly one – so Christ and His bride, the Church. Christ prays for us, and we pray, *“that we may all be one.”*

And Christ so loved His bride that He doesn't just pray for this to happen, and then wait and see. Wait and see if we really mean it. Wait and see if we're really going to try to make this work! No, He prays and then provides the means for our oneness. He doesn't force us, and He doesn't overlook our sin and pretend it really doesn't matter. He knows what needs to be done, for us to be made one with Him. And so right after praying these words, He goes to the Garden of Gethsemane. He goes to lay down His life for the sin of the world; for His bride. It is not easy. When He gets to the Garden of Gethsemane, He prays in agony. But His love will let Him do nothing less. The oneness of the Garden of Eden can only be restored in this way. And so He does not resist, but goes willingly to the cross. To take away the sin that divides us. The sin that divides us from God, and the sin that divides us from each other. That thereby forgiven, we may again be one.

And this is exactly what has happened! This is what we have been celebrating this Easter season (now coming to an end) and with our celebration of the Ascension of our Lord. That God and man are again one. The division of sin has been taken away by Christ as He paid the price for our sin on the cross. The division of death has been taken away by Christ as He rose from the dead and broke the power of the grave. And the division when Adam and Eve were driven out of Paradise has been taken away by Christ in His ascension. God and man are again one. Man with God is on the throne in Heaven. . . . And in Christ, this oneness is ours. In Christ we are again at one with God. In Christ we are again one with each other. In Christ, and only in Christ, we are truly, perfectly, one.

Yesterday, when Scott and Amy were united by God as one, they lit what is called a “unity candle.” You've probably seen this before – there are three candles on a stand; the two outside candles represent the husband and wife as individuals; and they together light with these two flames the middle candle, showing that the two have now become one. . . . Well, Christ and His bride, the Church, have their own unity flame, of sorts – the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit which, as we will celebrate next week with Pentecost, came to the Church **in tongues of fire** which seemed rest on each disciples' head. And it is this Holy Spirit that unites us to Christ. The Holy Spirit, which as we confess *“calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one, true faith.”* (Small Catechism) The Holy Spirit unites us as one with Christ as He comes to us today not in tongues of fire, but in His Word, and in Baptism, and in Holy Communion. Through these gifts the Holy Spirit comes to us. Through these gifts we are given the gifts of faith and forgiveness, life and salvation. Through these gifts we are united with Christ. The Bridegroom and His Bride, made one. And

what God has joined together, let no man put asunder.

And so despite the outward disunity of the Christian Church today – which is offensive and sinful and for which we should pray for unity – there is another reality. As we will again speak in the Nicene Creed in just a moment, there is “*one holy Christian and apostolic church.*” We say “*I believe in*” *this* because we can’t see this oneness. But it is there. By grace through faith in our Saviour Jesus Christ. In our Bridegroom. For as unworthy a bride as we are, He has taken us as His own. He has washed us clean, and feeds us, and will present us to Himself in the end as a radiant bride, “*without spot or wrinkle or any other blemish.*” (Eph 5:26-27) And as for any bride and groom, the wedding day cannot come soon enough, so too for us can this day not come soon enough. When Christ will return for us.

Until that day we pray with Christ that we may be one. Until that day we repent and receive the forgiveness of Christ that makes us one with Him and one with each other. Until that day, we feast at this table, the foretaste of the feast to come. The foretaste of the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which has no end. Until that day, “*The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ . . . He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*” (Rev 22:17, 20)

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.