

20 May 2007  
Easter 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“True Unity in Christ”

Text: John 17:20-26 (Acts 1:12-26; Revelation 22:1-6, 12-20)

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

There is one, unmistakable *theme* running through the Holy Gospel we heard today: and that is unity, oneness. Jesus prays that all Christians be as unified as He is to the Father, and the Father to Him – a true unity and oneness of heart and mind and will; a unity not just on the outside, but all the way down to our very being, to our very core.

And yet there is one, unmistakable *reality* running through our world today: and that is that we are not unified; we are not one. We are not even close. And things don't seem to be getting any better – in many congregations, in our synod, in the Church throughout the world. We continue to hear about splits, battles, disputes, separations, and condemnations. And at times it seems so bad that you have to admit that it's a miracle that there's even a Christian Church at all! *Because if it were up to us . . .*

Well, that's the point. The Christian Church isn't something *we* do. It is a miracle. It is the work of God in the world. And *this* Sunday, perhaps like no other, can help us focus on that. For this Sunday is the Sunday sandwiched in between the Ascension of our Lord (which we celebrated Wednesday night) and Pentecost (which we will celebrate next Sunday). And so its message can get lost in the shadow of those two great festivals. But this Sunday really brings them together. For it reminds us that both the Ascension of our Lord and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost are all about the continuing work of God in the world. God building His Church. God bringing the message of the cross and atonement of Jesus to those who do not know Him, and uniting them to Himself. And that while God uses people like the 11 apostles, Matthias, and folks like us – it is really *His* work.

And it doesn't take long to figure that out, once you see what we have done in this world! The disunity *we* have worked, and continue to work. From the very beginning, when sin caused Adam and Eve to turn against each other. Then you had Cain against Able, Isaac against Ishmael, Jacob against Esau. Absalom turned against his father David. Israel split in two after Solomon's death. And even after Jesus came, it didn't take long for disunity to flower again, when as soon as Paul planted churches in Galatia and Corinth, factions developed. Heresies divided the early church for hundreds of years. There was the great schism at the turn of the first millennium, then came the divisions and condemnations at the time of the Reformation, and now the modern-day situation where it's hard to even count the number of Christian denominations and sub-denominations!

*If it were up to us . . . well, that's what we've done.* Husband against wife, brother against brother, children against parents, Christian against Christian. Sin has taken the perfect unity and harmony of Eden, and caused the disunity and discord we see today. And you and I are not guiltless, innocent by-standers in this.

**So has Jesus' prayer for unity and oneness in His Church gone unanswered for all these years?**

No! For while at times we may be tempted to think: *If only Jesus were here . . .* the truth is that He is here! For the Ascension of our Lord and the sending of the Holy Spirit testify that our Lord is still working in the world, and still building His Church. For our Lord ascends and sends His Spirit so that He be not just in one place at one time, but in *every* pulpit, font, and altar at all times! His Word, Baptism, and Supper bringing the glory and work of His cross to every part of the world, and uniting people of every tribe, nation, and language to Himself. Undoing the disunity and discord of sin through the forgiveness of our sins.

*For that is the only way.* Mere outward unity never lasts. Overlooking our differences only makes them reappear more violently later. And pretending that there are many versions of the truth really only makes matters worse. There is only one unity that is true unity, and that is unity in Christ through the forgiveness of our sins. For only united in Him can we be truly united to one another.

And so Jesus prayed for “*those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.*” This word is the preaching of the apostles. The preaching of the Law that shows us our sin, and the preaching of the Gospel that shows us our Saviour. The preaching of the Law that shows us the disunity and discord we have caused in our selfishness – as I seek to use others for my advantage, as I want them to serve me instead of the other way around, and as I seek to exert my power over others instead of humbling myself to them. That I am too willing to give up the truth for friendship, that I do not love others enough to tell them of Jesus, and that I too often live by the devil’s creed of “*live and let live.*” Yes, that’s the devil’s creed, for it’s the *exact opposite* of what Jesus did – who would not let us just live in our sin, but who came to save us.

And that is the preaching of the Gospel, that shows us the divine remedy to the disunity and discord of our selfishness – **the forgiveness that is found only in Christ.** The One who did not *live and let live*, but who came and died that we may live. Who died to pay the price of our life-stealing sin, and then rose that we might rise to new life with Him. To new life in Him. To restore the unity and oneness of Eden by uniting us to Himself.

**And this He is doing**, although it will never be perfect as long as we live in this sin-filled world. But one sinner at a time, He is working. Uniting us to His life-restoring death and resurrection in Holy Baptism. Bringing us daily to the life-restoring death and resurrection of Holy Absolution. And implanting in us His life-restoring death and resurrection through His body and blood in Holy Communion. And through this Word and through these means, we are forgiven and restored and united to Him, and we are united to one another *in Him*. Any unity outside of Him and His truth is no real unity at all. But *in Him* we are united and joined to one another as closely as He is in the Father and the Father is in Him. Living for one another, and dying for one another. Praying for one another, and serving one another. Forgiving one another, and loving one another.

And we have His promise that this will be the case, in this in between time – this time between our Lord’s first coming in the flesh, and His second coming in glory. For in His prayer that we heard today – did you hear it? Jesus prays for those *who will believe in me through their word*. Not who might, but who will! For *He* is doing it, not us. If it were up to us, we would have to pray: *please, let somebody, anybody believe*

*through the Word that I confess! But His Word, living and active, filled with His Spirit, will work exactly what He desires. And join many to Him.*

And though we will never see that glory, that unity, that perfect harmony and oneness here on earth, as we live under the cross, we will see it, when our Lord returns and the picture given us in Revelation becomes a *visible* reality. And I say *visible* reality, for that picture is already reality for all who are in Christ! Yes, as we gather around the Lamb with all the angels, and archangels, and all the company of Heaven! *We just can't see it yet.* But this is what Christ is working and accomplishing already now through His Word and Spirit. With *the water of life* filling our font, *the light of His Word* lighting our way, and *the fruit of His tree of life* on our altar. (Rev 22:1-2, 5)

And so He bids us come, to receive these gifts. And we come and are forgiven, restored, and united in Him. And then we repeat back to Him what He has said to us: *Come!* And behold, He is coming. Now in His gifts, but then in His glory. And we will see Him as He is. And we will see the Church as she really is, the Bride of Christ, in all her beauty and glory. United as one in Him.

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.