

24 May 2009  
The Seventh Sunday of Easter

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“One in Christ”

Text: John 17:11b-19

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

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

This week we bring the season of Easter to an end. It has been a joyous and glorious fifty days, remembering the great work of our Saviour Jesus for us and for our salvation; His extraordinary victory over those great enemies of ours named sin, death, and the devil. In Jesus, we need fear them no more. In Jesus, they can harm us none. Next Sunday we will celebrate the great Feast of Pentecost, when Jesus fulfilled His promise to send the Holy Spirit, and we begin to consider Jesus' *ongoing* work for us. For His ascension - which we celebrated Wednesday night - does not mean that He is gone - only that He is now working in a new way.

So how appropriate to end this Easter season by hearing Jesus pray. It is a good example for us, and a good reminder that Jesus is always praying for you - even after His resurrection and ascension. When you forget to pray for yourself, Jesus is bringing you and your needs before His Father, always interceding for us - which I know at least for me, is a very comforting thought.

But the prayer of Jesus that we hear today is of special importance, because it is His final prayer before His arrest and crucifixion. And when time is short, you pray for what matters most. So what is it that Jesus prays? **“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”** He prays that His disciples, His children, His Church, may be one. One, even as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united as one in the Holy Trinity. One, even as “a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh.” (Matt 19:5) One, as the number that cannot be divided. A true and complete uniting.

But as we look around at the world today, we see anything but oneness. Sin divides what God has joined together. Marriages are broken, brother turns against brother, ancient hostilities and prejudices turn country against country. Perhaps these could be expected, the result of sin in our world. But most tragically, we see this hostility and division also in the Church for which Jesus prays, which has been shattered

into literally thousands of denominations, with fighting within every denomination, within church bodies, within individual congregations. And if you have not shed tears about this, you should. For every division hurts the whole church and effects every part of her, whether you are directly involved or not. In fact, the fighting once got so bad in the early church that a *pagan* historian remarked that “no wild beasts were so hostile to men as were the Christians to one another.”

No wonder Jesus prays ***that we may be one***. No one knows the sin in this world and its devastating effects more than He who made this world and watched us fall. No one knows the destructiveness and depths of sin more than He who took it all upon Himself on the cross. No one knows the sting of death more than He who was swallowed up by it, so that He could swallow it up in His resurrection. No one knows more than Jesus the hurt and pain *you* feel because of sin and death, because of division and separation, because of isolation and loneliness. No one knows more than Him that *it is not good for man to be alone*. And so He prays for you. That you may not be alone. ***That we may be one***.

**But how is that oneness achieved, in the Church?** Many attempts are made today, but all fall short. Agreeing to disagree is not real oneness, but a *false* unity. Tolerance is even worse than that, for it acknowledges differences even while oxymoronically trumpeting unity. And then there are those who deny that truth exists at all, and that our unity comes in a common search for the truth - whatever size, shape, and form that search may look like for each person. Let us shed tears over these developments in the Church as well.

For all these paths to oneness suffer a common malady - they are all man-made. And no man-made unity is true oneness, nor will it last. There is only one unity that is true and lasting - the oneness accomplished not by human hands, but by the hands that were both human and divine. The hands once nailed to the cross. The hands of our Saviour Jesus. *We are one when we are one in Him*.

So how is this accomplished? How are we one in Christ? Jesus mentions two ways in His prayer - two ways that will not be surprising to you at all. First, He prays: ***“Holy Father, keep them in your name . . . that they may be one.”*** We are united to God and to one another when the Holy Name of God is put upon us in Holy Baptism. In those waters is a work not that you do, but the applying of the death and resurrection of Christ to you. There, Jesus unites you to Himself, frees you from your slavery to sin, forgives you, and raises you to a new life in Him. There you are given a new family of faith, and we become brothers and sisters in Christ. . . . Now, as with all families, brothers and sisters sometimes fight - but we dare not lose sight of the unity we have in Christ. You may not like all your brothers and sisters, but you are still their keeper, and we need to pray for them, help them, love them, correct them, admonish them, and encourage them in the truth. Carefully

and patiently, not rashly and harshly. Knowing that as one in Christ, if you hurt them you are really hurting yourself; and if you help them, you are helping yourself. *And so we are one when we are one in Christ.*

And then second, Jesus prays: **“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”** To sanctify means to make holy, and we are made holy when we are forgiven. Forgiveness which is *not* a feeling, but the objective Word of God pronounced upon you; the verdict that you are *not guilty* because of the work of Christ for you; that His death and resurrection has atoned for your sin and made you right with God. You do not have to wonder about your standing before God, because the Word of God is faithful and true and does what it says. For the Word of God is no dead and lifeless word, a word without power. It is a living and active Word; a Spirit-filled Word; a Word that became flesh. And so a Word that comes to you, works in you, and sanctifies you.

And nowhere is that more evident for us than **here at the altar**. For here in the Lord’s Supper, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, comes to you in truth, and gives you His body to eat and His blood to drink. Here, the living and active Word comes and forgives your sin as He gives you Himself. Here, Jesus unites you to Himself in the closest bond of fellowship, and makes you one with Him and one with each other. Just as with Baptism, here is a work not that you do, but that He does. We come here as many grains, each with our own lives, struggles, hurts, and problems - and are made one loaf in Jesus. One loaf, made holy by the Holy One.

And so unity and oneness in the Church comes from the Name and Word of God. But where these are denied; where we judge the Word instead of the Word judging us - either wholly or in part - our unity is broken, and in some cases, shattered. And this is what we see today, as some deny that what God calls sin is really sin. As some would deny the work and presence of Christ for us in Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. As some would change the Name of God and so change who God is and how we think of Him. As some would belittle our Saviour and claim other ways to salvation. And there are myriad other examples that could be listed here, of how God’s Word is denied among us. A denial which is no small thing, and rents asunder Christian from Christian, brother from brother.

*So what are we to do?* Well first of all: repent. For none of us is guiltless. It is easy to look at all the false teaching and schism happening in the Church around the world with a sense of either scorn or pride. But when you repent, you are not looking **at** your brother with a condescending look from above - you are **with** him in humility, in brokenness, in need of forgiveness. And we are, together, where we belong - focused not on ourselves, but on our Saviour. That He may not only forgive you, but heal the hurt you have caused; unite the divisions you have abetted; love those you have failed to love. *That we may be one in Him.*

And then second, follow Jesus' example and pray. Pray that your Father would bring together His Church in oneness through your Saviour and His Spirit. And trust and rejoice that He is! That your prayer is heard and answered, in ways that sometimes we are privileged to see, and in ways that often remain unknown to us.

But then also, pray to stand firm in God's Name and Word, and that those who now deny would come to know the truth as well. For only in the Name of Jesus and His Word is the forgiveness, truth, and holiness that we need. And it is through His Word that your Saviour is working, making us One in Him. If we lose that, we lose everything. But if we have that, we have everything, for we have His promise that where His Name is there is He, working through His Word to bless you and keep you.

**And He is.** For just as Jesus was resolute in setting His face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51) to ascend the cross for you, and nothing could stop Him - so too is He resolute for you, and for His Church, now. To bless us and keep us and forgive us, until the last day, when Christ comes as the Bridegroom, to take home His Bride, the Church, forever. On that day, the oneness that is now hidden will finally be revealed.

You know, the devil is constantly tempting us to look at the Church and despair - at the division, and the scandal; tempting us to think that Jesus' prayer for oneness went unanswered. But do not believe it. Christ has not left His Bride, and His love for her and for you remains undiminished. *How* our Father answers this prayer, and *when*, is not up to us. Only know that He is. For that is His promise to us. His promise, which is more sure than anything we can see anyway. For if Christ is risen from the dead, is there any problem of ours too great for Him?

So let us trust, and trusting exclaim and rejoice into the face of our adversary one more time, that *Christ is risen!* [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] And truly in Him, we are one.

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.