

12 May 2013
Easter 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“United IN the Word BY the Word”

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

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

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

Happy Mother's Day to all you mothers. I remember my mother saying that when it came to raising her children: *we did the best we could, and prayed a lot.* All in all, I think that's a pretty good theology for raising kids. We do the best we can at fulfilling the vocation of father or mother that our gracious Lord has given us, but always knowing how sinful and failing we are, and so entrusting our children to the Lord in prayer. There is no better thing, no more important thing, a parent or anyone else can do that that. Sometimes, I think, we underestimate and so underuse the gift of prayer. We must learn to not do that. It is the best thing, the most powerful thing, we can do. To join our Lord in prayer. Jesus Himself was praying all the time, all over the place in the Gospels. It was the air He breathed. And so for us too as Christians - as little Christs. There may be lots of people you cannot do anything for, but you can pray for them. And even for those you can help, don't rely on what you can do! Pray for them too! To the One who is almighty and can do all things. To the One who does far more than we ask or imagine (Eph 3:20). To the One who has promised to hear and answer the prayers of His children. Your prayers and mine.

Today in the Holy Gospel we heard again Jesus praying. A prayer very much for you and me. For Jesus is praying, as He says, ***not for these only*** - not only for the twelve - ***but also for those who will believe in me through their word.*** Through their word. You see, the words of the apostles are important. They are the *eyewitnesses* of all Jesus said and did. Jesus taught them. Jesus showed them. Jesus revealed to them. And now, they report their *eyewitness* testimony to us in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. That's why - as we heard in the first reading from Acts - the one who replaced Judas in the apostolic band had to be an eyewitness. He had to be ***one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us.*** And so the words we hear today from them are not just pious thoughts or spiritual reflections, but the *eyewitness* testimony of those who were there. Testimony that got most of them killed. But now, to us, testimony

through which the Holy Spirit works. We hear and believe.

That is what Jesus prays for here. That, through the word of the apostles, we *may all be one with God*. It is no mere earthly unity that Jesus is praying for here. That we all just get along. That is too small. And Jesus is not about earthly unity. We could all get along and be united *separate from Christ*, and we would be lost. That would not fulfill this prayer. But this unity for which Jesus prays here is different. This unity may, in fact, cause division on earth, as Jesus said before: *Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law*" (Luke 12:51-53).

That's not a very good Mother's Day verse, is it? But the truth is that even more important and vital than our family ties is our tie to our triune God. To be united to Jesus and so be united to His Father. For with Jesus, *blood is not thicker than water - water is thicker than blood*. The water of baptism trumps all. Families are important, don't get me wrong. God invented and created them, and all God does is good. But they can become idols in the hands and hearts of sinners, too. Far more vital is to be united to Jesus in His death and resurrection. United with Him as sons of God. And thus united to Him, united to one another. And that kind of unity comes only by the Word and Spirit of God.

For Jesus wants all the world to believe not just anything, but to believe *in Him*; that He is the One sent from God to be our Saviour. That all trust in Him with their life - our *eternal* life. To receive forgiveness from Him. To know Him as the One who went to the cross for us. To know how greatly He united Himself to us. Uniting Himself to us in our flesh in a birth like ours, and then uniting Himself to us in our flesh in a death like ours. All so that we be united to Him in a resurrection like His, and live with Him forever. That's what Easter and this whole Easter season (now concluding) has been all about.

And this unity, this life, this proclamation, this faith, this forgiveness, will come through the word of the apostles. A truth which cause some to laugh, for aren't those words the problem? Isn't it the words of the apostles that divide us and cause schism? Does "is" really mean "is" when Jesus said "This is my body," or only *signify*, or *symbolize*? Does "all" really mean "all," or did Jesus only die for *some*? Does "I forgive you" really mean "I forgive you," or is there something we must do? Should babies be baptized? The altar be open? Tongues be spoken? The rapture be looked for? And about a thousand other disputes over the words of the apostles invented over the years . . . even: Is Jesus really our only Saviour from sin, death, and hell, or aren't there really some couple other ways? So the words of the

apostles, their testimony, is often sadly set aside in the name of unity.

But that is not Jesus' unity. Jesus' oneness. For the problem is not with the words, but with us. When we do not believe the words. When we doubt and question them. When we do not live by them. When we do not love them, gladly hear and learn them, and cling to them. When we pit word against word, and our thoughts and desires against God's Word and will. When Bibles grow dusty and hearts grow hard.

But as Jesus prays, *it is exactly through their words* - which are really Jesus' words - that we are united. United to Christ and one with God. The words in Holy Baptism that unite us to Christ; that place the name of the Holy Trinity upon us and claim us as His own; that wash us clean from our sins. Yes, His Word says, you are His child. The words in Holy Absolution that not only *assure* us that our sins are forgiven, but give us the very forgiveness proclaimed. Yes, His word says, you are forgiven. The words of the Holy Supper that make bread and wine the Body and Blood of our Saviour who is then placed into our mouths and poured over our lips as heavenly, holy food; food that isn't just holy but that makes us holy. Yes, His Word says, Christ in us and we in Christ. And the words of the Holy Gospel telling us the story of Christ and that this is not just the story of others, but our story as well. We too are the ones given sight, healed from our spiritual leprosy, given ears to hear, and raised from the dead. These words, the words of the apostles. These words, Christ's words. These words, now our words.

These words which are trustworthy and true. That's what the angel told John, as we heard in Revelation. Which words? The words of Christ. All of them. We can depend on them. You can stake your life on them. Many did. And testified to their truth through their martyrdom. The words of the world, the thoughts of the world, not so much. But the words of Christ you can take to the bank. No, more than that, you can take them to heaven. NO - they will take you to heaven, even as they bring heaven here to you as Jesus comes to you through His Word and Sacraments.

That this would all be true FOR YOU . . . that's what Jesus is praying for. That what we now believe we would then see. With our own resurrected eyes. That the glory of being sons of God - a glory which Jesus has already given to us here - we may see as we see Jesus in His resurrected glory. A glory hidden in His incarnation, but which now shines forth fully in Jesus resurrected and ascended.

And with that glory comes also His love; comes also His Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God drawing us into the eternal love of God. To know as we are known. To love as we are loved. To glorify God with the whole company of heaven forever as the Bride of Christ. And what is in this heaven - did you hear? ***The tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit.*** Twelve, the number of the apostles. The apostles whose word

now feeds us with the Word of God, washes us with His forgiveness, and puts in us His Body and Blood. Their word, their testimony, through which our Lord makes us one. One with Him. His work. Not ours. A gift. A blessing.

That's why Jesus came. And so what He prays for: for us and for our salvation.

When my mother prayed for her children, it was because she knew the dangers of the world. She knew there was much she could not do, and so she entrusted her children to the loving hands of the One who can do all things. A great gift she gave to her children, her prayers.

When Jesus prays for you, however, it is not because there is much He cannot do, but rather because He came and DID all things. All that is needed. All that is necessary. And gives it all to you, by grace through faith. **And so He prays that you may believe it.** And believing, be one with Him. And one with Him, then one with each other. And truly one with each other, that the light of His love and life shine in you now, as it shines in eternity over all who are Christ's. All whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. Your name. For you are Christ's and Christ is yours.

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

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.