

John 17:20-26 (NRSV)

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

There’s a story I sometimes tell at New Member Classes about a Lutheran who is stranded on a desert island. Being a Lutheran, he is, of course, industrious, and so he builds a house and a barn and a bunch of other buildings. Eventually he is rescued and takes his rescuers on a tour of the island. He points out the house and the barn and two huts with crosses on them. The rescuers point to the first and ask, “What’s that building?” He says, “Oh, that’s my church! I hate to have to leave it.” They then ask, “What’s the other building?” He says, “Oh, that’s the church I *used to* go to.”

The point, of course, is that if even a single Lutheran can have a fight and storm off to start a new church, imagine what a whole crop of them can do. People who feel threatened by organized religion haven't ever been to a church convention. Or, for that matter a clergy meeting.

Today's Gospel reading asks us to think about the unity of the church. This reading comes from the end of the Farewell Discourses and is, itself, the ending of what has been called the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus since the 16th century. Jesus asks for the church to be one, just as He and the Father are one.

But what is the nature of our unity? How are we one? Certainly we aren't all the same – we don't look the same or act the same. I found this out from our high schoolers and confirmands this past week. We were talking about groups in school, and I discovered that there are preps and gangsters and Goths and a whole menagerie of various types, some of which I had never heard of. There are “emos,” who are apparently emotional people – I don't actually know if I've ever met any *un*emotional high schoolers, so I can only guess what emos act like. Unsurpassed drama, I can only guess. I understand that many emos used to be Goths, and if that makes any sense to you, you are tapped into the youth culture.

And, of course, there are all kinds of adults as well, even in this nave. Take a look around – men, women, young, old, new to the faith and “cradle Lutherans,” all classes, racial and ethnic groups. No, we aren't all the same, and that's good news. What does Saint Paul tell us, a variety of gifts but the same spirit, a variety of services but the same Lord. Paul asks, “What if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?” I remember

seeing a cartoon of a couple of people bringing carrying a big eye into church. No, we wouldn't want to be the same.

Well, perhaps our unity would be in our common attitudes about issues facing the church. But the church is seldom of a single mind about anything and has changed its stance on popular issues, sometimes quite dramatically. Linda was telling me about an historical novel she is reading on women's battles to get the vote early in the last century. Women were chaining themselves to the gates of the White House, taking part in hunger strikes, being beaten and force-fed by police. We sometimes forget that the People of God were on both sides of this issue, some churches favoring women's suffrage and some opposing it. The same kinds of divisions happened with slavery. Now, of course, we can look back and say how silly those people were, but I'm also pretty sure that wise people a century from now will look back at some of the ridiculous things we believe and think, "Good grief, they thought what?" No, our unity is not our common attitudes on issues facing the church.

Well, perhaps our unity consists in our beliefs about God. And yet, we as the Lutheran church in America embrace a wide range of beliefs about, for example, what heaven is like, where it is, when we'll get there and how much company we'll have. As the Lutheran church in America, we embrace a wide range of beliefs about who should be allowed to get married, when couples can have children and whether it is a sin for them to get divorced.

And even the beliefs that we *do* share are frequently at least a little heretical. I mean, yes, I know that we are saved by grace through faith, but certainly a few good deeds will improve the odds a little, wouldn't they? No, they wouldn't. Or, aren't you just a little uncomfortable with that fearsome God of the Old Testament. Couldn't we just skip over the Old Testament and stick with the New? No, we can't.

Anyone who has been to a Synod Assembly or taught Sunday School or has graded confirmation exams knows that our unity is not based on our shared beliefs about God.

But if the basis of our unity is not that we're all the same, or that we have the same beliefs about the world or about God, then what might it be?

Well, if you look carefully at the Gospel text for today, you'll see that it isn't important who we are so much as *whose* we are. The source of our unity isn't anything about us. The source of our unity is God in Christ who has called us. "The glory that you have given me, I have given them, so that they might be one." We are drawn together by our baptism, we are held together by our Eucharist and in and after our deaths, we remain together in a communion of saints throughout the centuries whom Christ has called.

This is truly Good News, the best News we could have. We are part of the Family of God not because we are all the same, or because we have the same attitudes or because we have the same grasp of the mysteries of God, but rather because Christ chose us.

And why is that important? We can cherish our differences, because our similarities are not what holds us together. We can admit our confusions and disagreements, because our agreement isn't what holds us together. We can forgive one another, because nothing we do is as important or as powerful as what holds us together. What holds us together is that Christ chose us for his own.

Does this mean that nothing can pull us apart? No, unfortunately it doesn't mean that. As a church, we face issues that threaten to divide us. Issues on the blessing of the unions of gay and lesbian couples and the ordination of non-celibate gay and

lesbian candidates for ministry. Issues on the role of the U.S. in the global economy and in directions for world and national mission and justice. We see the alarming splits among our Episcopalian brothers and sisters. No, the church can be pulled apart. Right now, the church is not one, not by a long shot. Even among Lutherans, there are more than two dozen varieties of Lutherans who can't even share communion. That the Body of Christ is so divided is a crime against God, no matter how sure we are that we are right or how serious we are about sticking to our own little group.

What it means is that because we are united in Christ, we as a denomination and we as a church should be very careful about the things that we allow to divide us. Remember the earlier example about the disagreements on women getting to vote? Many of the things that people thought were so important decades ago seem pretty foolish now. Does this mean that what we believe doesn't matter, that we should just give up our disagreements? No, not at all. What it means is that because we are united by Christ, we cannot just walk away from one another. We are not allowed to take our toys and go home. Because we are chosen by Christ, we are brothers and sisters. Sometimes brothers and sisters disagree. Yes. But we disagree as children of the same heavenly Father. We disagree, if we must, as brothers and sisters chosen by Christ. Brothers and sisters who will, someday, be one.

Amen.