

“That They May All Be One”

Seventh Sunday of Easter – John 17:20-26

*from a sermon preached at St. Mark's, Hastings, May 23, 2004
preached at St. Paul's, Henderson, May 8, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

As is our custom, today being Mothers' Day, it is also Youth Sunday, so at the 10:00 service, Alexis and Renner have the privilege of presenting their senior message. That, however, does not get y'all off the hook. It just means that you get the *concentration* of my meandering meditations on this morning's readings from Holy Writ.

At the same time that I was beginning my meandering and meditating, mostly about this morning's reading from John's Gospel, I was engaged in a different sort of preparation for a very significant milestone in the life of by far the youngest member of St. Paul's 8:00 congregation. This morning down at Holy Name, the second grade class from the school will be receiving their First Communion, and to make sure that she keeps up with the rest of her class, Sophia and I have been having a delightful time preparing her to receive Communion for the first time here with *us* this morning. During our time together, I *tried* to keep up with her nearly endless stream of *very* good questions, but *mostly* we spent our time talking about the similarities and differences between the Episcopalians and the Roman Catholics, especially in the way we understand Communion.

So with Jesus's prayer in this morning's reading from John's Gospel still ringing in our ears, let me give the rest of you the (only slightly) expanded version of what Sophia and I have already worked out for ourselves. You see the real issue behind who is willing to give Communion to whom, behind who is willing to *receive* Communion from whom, is the issue of what we mean by the unity of the Church. During the Middle Ages, when relics were the source of great devotion and sometimes fanatic obsession, it is said that there were in existence enough splinters of the “True Cross of Christ” to build a modern skyscraper. Just running up and down Green Street, it's obvious that the one, holy, universal Church of Jesus Christ is in so many pieces it is hard to count them all.

Often the most apparent point of divergence is in how the church is organized: Is there a central authority, an individual or a set body, or is doctrine and overall policy decided by broader consensus? Is authority and doctrine contained in a document or is it passed from generation to generation in the persons of those chosen to defend it? Which translation of the Scriptures should we use, and whose interpretation of them? Does the congregation as a whole make every decision, only the big, important ones, or do they elect *leaders* to make those decisions for them?

Sometimes the differences are seemingly more superficial, but held just as strongly: Can a Christian be said to be filled with the Holy Spirit and not speak in tongues as the Apostles did on the first Pentecost – and what does speaking in tongues *sound* like? May the bread used for Communion be the bare essence of bread, flour and water mixed together and pressed into little wafers, or should it be bread closer to what we all eat at home – and is grape juice the same as wine? How many drops, or how many handfuls, or how many *gallons* of water are needed for Baptism to be valid – and can you do it more than once. And are these *Sacraments*, outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, or are they mere *memorials* of what Jesus commanded us to do?

Even when we agree on all that much, churches end up becoming denominations over things like which hymnal to use, which pastor or minister or priest or bishop – has had his or her feelings hurt, which decision has ticked off which people. We divide and splinter the Church nearly every chance we get.

But here in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel according to John, on the night before he died for us, at the same table at which he delivered bread and wine to his friends saying it *was* his own body and blood, for them, Jesus prayed that his followers would be united in the same way that he and the Father were one.

Fine. But how do we do that? How do we live into the unity for which Christ prayed, for which Christ lived, for which Christ died? By giving up what we believe to be true? By finding some single authority who everyone agrees has been given the whole truth of God's revelation? By throwing all our differences into a blender and living with whatever homogenized goop comes out? By accepting everything that any person or group defines as the truth for *them* at this *particular* point in human history? By no means! And, dare I say it, God forbid!

No, we live into the unity that Christ has desired for us, that Christ has offered us, that Christ has *commanded* of us, not by ignoring, but by looking *beyond* our differences. We live into the unity of Christ by seeing that in the mind of *Christ* we are *already* one Body, one Spirit – with one Lord, and one Faith, and one Baptism. As with creation at the beginning of beginnings, the unity of the Church is immediately and irrevocably true in the very *moment* of God's speaking of it. We celebrate that unity in offering Communion to *whoever* will come to receive it. We proclaim that unity in faithful and bold witness to whatever fragment of the truth of God's nature and the truth of *human* nature that God has revealed to *us*. We work in and for that unity by reaching beyond ourselves, by reaching beyond the stained glass and the oaken doors of our sanctuaries, by reaching beyond the comfort of our own relics of the true Church, our own splinter of the true Cross of Christ, by reaching out with the very hands of *Christ* to those who need so desperately to hear the Good News of his love, of his mercy, of his grace.

We live into the unity of Christ by simply *being* Christ... to the world. And being Jesus Christ to the world, my dear Sophia, being Jesus Christ to the world is what we *all* get ready for *every* time we receive his Body and Blood here at this table. I'm *very* glad you're joining us. We could use your help.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*