

"Christian Unity"

Text: John 17:20-26

May God our Father bless you with strength of faith and joy in the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear

Fellow Redeemed:

If I were to ask you to give someone a message, and you agreed to do so, that wouldn't be the end of it, would it. You would need to hear the message, obviously. You wouldn't just say "Sure." and then walk away. You wouldn't assume that any old message would do.

Now answer this question: (Bear with me while we make the connection to delivering a message.) Does your family have an escape plan in case of a fire at night? Most families don't, but those that do most often know to include not only escape routes for each family member, but also a designated gathering point. Firemen all around the country tell horror stories about moms and dads who rush back into a burning building to try to rescue a family member who is already safe on the other side of the house.

These things, believe it or not, are related. We are talking today about unity, and just as agreeing to send a message is not unity unless you *agree on the message*, and just as agreement on meeting is not unity unless you can agree on *where to meet*, so also unity in the Church must be a specific thing. Uncertainty, ambiguity and lack of clarity destroy, rather than promote, both unity in the Church and the Christian faith in general. While this is most certainly true, the most common reaction today to this tragic, inner disunity is "*So what?*" This morning our text will teach us both the truth about Church unity and its vital importance to every single one of us. That portion of God's Word according to which we will be guided is found in John's Gospel, the 17th Chapter:

John 17:20-26 *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹ "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²² "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: ²³ "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. ²⁴ "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may*

behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ "O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. ²⁶ "And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

These are God's Words, perfect in every way. May God the Holy Spirit grant you the grace to trust that these are God's Words and to hear and learn from them accordingly. To this end we pray, **"Sanctify us through the Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth."** Amen.

We tend to focus more often on the failings of the Apostles than we do on their strengths – in part because we fail to recognize or acknowledge what their true strengths were. For example, one of their bright, shining moments was revealed in Luke 11 when they approached Jesus and asked him simply, **"Lord, teach us to pray."** Why was this a shining moment for the apostles? They were acknowledging both their own condition and the source that alone could give them help. Human beings are sheep in God's sight. It's not something we can opt out of. It is what we are. What God wants to see in and from us is not pretense but a craving for guidance. He is not pleased when we pretend to be something other than sheep; he is pleased when we acknowledge our shortcomings and weaknesses and look to him for aid, comfort, strength and wisdom. This was a good moment for the disciples precisely because they didn't say, **"Lord, check out our new prayer."** They said, **"Lord, teach us..."** The result was Jesus' gift of what we today know as the Lord's Prayer.

Our text is part of a different prayer - Jesus' High Priestly or Sacerdotal prayer. It is an extremely important section in John's Gospel and, for that matter, in Jesus' ministry. Jesus here chooses his words very carefully. This was to be one of the last acts of ministry in the life of the Son of God and he knew that his words would make a lasting impression on the disciples. Again, understand that he chose his words carefully. What this means for you and me is that we ought to pay special attention to what *Jesus* is saying here. The goal here is not to dismiss the words and thoughts of this prayer as unimportant because they do not particularly interest me; it is to acknowledge them as interesting and important *because Jesus spoke them*.

Obviously the things Jesus prays about in this *High Priestly prayer* must be of greatest importance for us or he wouldn't have spoken them and God the Holy Spirit would not have bothered to make sure

that they were recorded for all time in our Bibles. We note first that these words from our Lord have a common thread or theme that stretches from one end of our text to the other. That general theme is *Christian unity*, and that is therefore the focus of our study this morning. The sad truth is that although Jesus emphasized the importance of Christian unity (and both established and promoted it for all of his followers) that gift is at best taken for granted, and at worst sorely abused in the Church today. In fact when it comes to Christian unity, we have in our possession a most precious and valuable gift that we nonetheless treat as common and of little value.

Let me give you an example. Have you ever seen how a young child will clutch something small in his little hand and then walk around for hours clinging to that certain thing? It is almost always something relatively insignificant - a flower petal, a butterfly's wing, a Cheerio, a pebble, a few blades of grass. Invariably the child forgets he is even holding onto whatever it is, but sooner or later looks again at what's in his now sweaty little hand and either eat it or wonders why in the world he's been holding onto it for all that time. If it no longer interests him, he simply drops it wherever he happens to be standing.

This is what the bulk of the Christian Church has done with this precious gift of Christian unity. Since the time of the Apostles, the Church has clung tightly to this gift – with good reason. They knew the value of the thing and they were not about to lose it. And then, for no apparent reason, certain segments of the church stopped, looked at Christian unity, and couldn't for the life of them remember why they were still carrying it around. They couldn't remember why they had at one time considered it important. To them it had become heavy, a burden and a nuisance. It was uncomfortable and it prevented them from clinging to other things they saw as more valuable. So they dropped Christian unity. Simply dropped it. Discarded it as worthless. They decided it no longer mattered that Christians only stand together in fellowship if they are completely agreed in what they taught and believed. By dropping Christian unity, they could then "pick up" countless new members who had different thoughts and beliefs on everything from sexual orientation to church fellowship. They made a trade, and as trades go, this was one of the worst in the history of Christianity.

But not here. By God's grace we enjoy a church that has not "dropped" Christian unity. We still cling tightly to it, and by God's grace we will tighten our grip on it this morning by learning again its true value.

Jesus prayed for us shortly before his death on the cross. Stop for a moment and reflect on what we just said. Jesus prayed *for us!* What a comfort to know that Jesus spoke to his Father on *our* behalf! What was it for which he asked? He asked the Father to grant us Christian unity. He said, ***"I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."*** He goes on, ***"...I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity..."*** (NIV)

How many things in our lives that are truly valuable do we treat as common and of little worth? What about this thing called Christian unity that we all share? Some of you have seen first-hand what happens to a congregation that loses its unity. The bickering and infighting, the hateful words, thoughts, and looks, the destructive gossip and slander - these are all just the tip of the iceberg. This is the ugly part that is seen. It is nothing compared to what lies beneath the surface. True unity, after all, is not formed from the outside in. It is a result of that which is on the inside coming out.

To learn to treasure our Christian unity we must first understand what our Christian unity really is. To understand what it is, we must understand how it is created. True Christian unity cannot be created by man; it can only be recognized by man to exist. It is created only by God the Holy Spirit. Here's what that means. Most Christian Churches today try to manufacture unity. They have no unity of faith and doctrine, since everyone believes something different. One believes the earth was created, another that it evolved. One believes women should be ordained as pastors, another believes that the Bible clearly forbids this. Homosexuality is an acceptable alternate lifestyle, homosexuality is sin. Clearly there is no basis for unity in such a group since they are all of a different mind and heart. The best that they can do is to agree to disagree agreeably. That is no more Christian unity than the Big Bad Wolf was Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother when he put on her robe and bonnet. The result is always a thoroughly confusing mess where immorality is tolerated – even celebrated – while everyone agrees to keep giving messages, even though absolutely no one can agree just what those messages will be. The struggle then boils down to finding those rare topics on which all can agree – remember Mother's Day, be kind to small animals, and respect the earth.

One reason unity is so precious is this very thing: mankind cannot decide to be in unity, he can only seek to determine if he has been given unity by the Holy Spirit. Again, man cannot manufacture true

unity. The Holy Spirit alone is the Author, the Creator. How does the Holy Spirit create unity? He does so by leading us to the truth of his Word, the Bible. Do you remember how we began? Simply agreeing to give someone a message is not good enough because not just any message will do, and there is a definite need to have a common meeting ground predetermined. That is how the Holy Spirit creates this precious unity that we enjoy. He has established the Bible as the common, predetermined meeting ground for all who would enjoy Christian unity. Next, he has used that common meeting ground (the Bible) to tell us exactly what our message should be. It is never up to man to figure out what he will say. God has given us the message.

Think back to when Jesus gave us the Great Commission: "**Go and make disciples of all nations...**" Jesus was fully aware that without a common message and a common place to stand there would be no unity. That is why he carefully added these words to his Great Commission: "**...teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you...**" This alone is the stuff that unity is made of. The only way it can be created in the first place is when each individual sinner is drawn by the Holy Spirit to subject his own wisdom and will to that which God has revealed to us in the Bible.

Why do you suppose your pastor urges you to go to church, urges you to read your Bibles and to pray regularly? It is, in large part, because he values most highly the Christian unity that we share. He knows that the only way to preserve and strengthen that unity is for each individual Christian to be guided ever more fully into loving conformity with Jesus' will for our lives. The more the Spirit conforms our lives to Jesus' life, the greater and the more secure becomes our Christian unity. This Christian unity, strong and unique in the world of today, will in turn draw others. So Jesus said in our text, "**May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.**"

Christian unity is what helps to make the Church strong. The message we speak is one and the same message, for it is the message of Jesus Christ, crucified for sinners. Any little divergence from God's Word, no matter how seemingly insignificant, serves only to weaken the Church, to weaken or destroy our precious Christian unity, and to weaken or even destroy our mission work. This Jesus does not want, as in our text he said, "**Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.**" Error destroys Christian

unity, and if left to its own, it destroys saving faith. Guard and preserve us, dear Lord Jesus, in true unity, for your name's sake. Amen.

Scripture Readings

NKJ **1 Kings 17:17-24** Now it happened after these things *that* the son of the woman who owned the house became sick. And his sickness was so serious that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸ So she said to Elijah, "What have I to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son?" ¹⁹ And he said to her, "Give me your son." So he took him out of her arms and carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰ Then he cried out to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?" ²¹ And he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, I pray, let this child's soul come back to him." ²² Then the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived. ²³ And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother. And Elijah said, "See, your son lives!" ²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now by this I know that you *are* a man of God, *and* that the word of the LORD in your mouth *is* the truth."

NKJ **Luke 7:11-17** Now it happened, the day after, *that* He went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and a large crowd. ¹² And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried *him* stood still. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." ¹⁵ So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother. ¹⁶ Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen up among us"; and, "God has visited His people." ¹⁷ And this report about Him went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region.

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Second Sunday after Pentecost– June 6, 2010

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn -#30- (Red Hymnal)

"Oh that I Had a Thousand Voices"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (1 Kings 17:17-24) Life and death are the subjects of our two Scripture readings this morning. The first is the account of the raising of the son of the widow through whom God fed Elijah during the great famine recorded in 1 Kings 17. We note here not only the power of God over death, but his compassion and patience with frail and fickle human beings.

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 121 (Brown Hymnal page 42)

The New Testament Lesson: (Luke 17:11-17) This is the account of the dramatic meeting of two processions outside the city of Nain. The one was the procession of death, led by a widow who lost her only son. The other a procession of life led by Jesus. The message here, again, is not only of God's power over death, but the fact that death itself must always give way to Jesus and the life he offers.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn -#428- (Red Hymnal)

"I Am Trusting Thee, Lord Jesus"

The Sermon – Text: John 17:20-26 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Christian Unity"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn -#437- (Red Hymnal)

"Who Trusts in God, a Strong Abode"

The Offering

The Prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn -#401- (Red Hymnal)

"Praise to Thee and Adoration"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance - Last Sunday (58) 2010 Average (53)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Prince of Peace of Loveland is scheduled to begin calling today to fill their upcoming vacancy. Pastor Luke Bernthal is considering the calls to Valentine, Mission, and White River. The CLC Convention is scheduled to begin two weeks from tomorrow in Eau Claire.

Summer Services – By resolution of the Church Council, June 30 is scheduled as the starting date for summer services. As was the case last year, these services will combine the basic elements of the Sunday service together with an interactive Bible study. Please remember that these services will be offered as you make your summer plans.

Baptism – The baptism of our newest member, Margaret Anderson, is scheduled for next Sunday during the worship service.

Men's Retreat and VBS – We are in the process of trying to schedule two summer activities (the Men's Retreat and Vacation Bible School) and we would of course like to include as many members in these events as possible. Men of the congregation please speak to the Pastor if you are interested in attending this year's retreat so that you can be included in the scheduling process. Families with VBS aged children please let Sandy know when your children would (and would not) be available, together with which kind of session you would most favor (morning, afternoon, or two full days).