

John 17:20-26
Seventh Sunday of Easter
June 1, 2025

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

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week, Jesus' final words in John 16 not only brought to completion his Upper Room discourse (from John 13 to John 16), but also brought us great confidence in *why* we ought pray: the Father loves us, for the Father loves His Son and has baptismally covered us in His Son's saving death. And, therefore, we ought with all boldness and confidence – not merely asking the ascended Jesus to intervene with an Almighty of whom we are afraid – but with all boldness and confidence we may go to the Father directly, always appealing that Christ's sacrificial death has forever justified us before God, reconciled us to the Father... in other words, always appealing in Jesus' name to the relationship that is ours with the Almighty God and therefore praying to the Father himself.

This we may do by the confidence we have in Christ Jesus, who, even as He anticipated returning to the Father, declared us his brothers this way: "I am ascending to *my* Father *and your* Father." And, if adopted brothers of Christ, if those who (if you will) look up

to and know their safety because of ‘bigger brother,’ then to see Him pray in our text gives us confidence to pray.

But Jesus prays not as a show, nor merely as an example. He prays because, in his hour of impending suffering, in his hour that would lead through the cross and tomb to the ascension and glory he anticipated, His mind and heart are on *you*. You, his beloved.

The first words of our text remind us that such thought of his brothers was initially on the Twelve: “I do not ask for these only”... which means, at first, he *was* asking for and focusing on them! But, now he turns his attention to pray “also for those who will believe in me through their word.” (That’s you!)

Here, we have a foundational statement for both the preaching office and the New Testament writings. “Through their word,” Jesus says ... not as if their *own* word, their own utterances (which, in the Greek, might use the term *ῥήμα*), but their utterance and record of the *divine* Word (so that our text uses the word *λογος*). Not as if their own word *about* Jesus, but their proclamation and written record of the divinely enfleshed Word who *is* Jesus. And what does *Jesus* say of that spoken and penned Word? What does He say about its power and efficacy? It will create faith: “I pray also for those who will *believe in me* through [the apostolic] word.”

The Word creates faith. When Jesus sends the apostles, he does so for them to preach, for faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of Christ. And when the apostles write, they know their

gospel accounts and epistles to be Scripture, for “these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ.”

So, is it mere legalism or moralism, or is it good holy will, that “we should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it”? As Jesus himself says, that’s how we will believe and trust in him!

But if the apostles’ doctrine is Jesus’ own doctrine... if their word in preaching and pen is nothing less than the divine news of the Word made flesh, so that that Word is bound to create faith... if that’s all so, then *why* is Jesus praying for those who will believe in Him through their word? If he’s not praying for them to be *granted* faith – that’s an assumed precedent in Jesus’ prayer for them – “I pray for all who *will* believe in me through the apostles’ word” – if he’s not praying for *the giving of faith*, why is he praying for the hearers? (Or, we might ask, why is he praying for *us*?)

He answers that immediately: “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us...” Why does he pray for us? Unity! *That’s* his desire: Unity! That may seem like an odd thing for which Jesus to be concerned. Shouldn’t he just be concerned about faith and salvation? Why worry if people have varying thoughts, as long as they all believe in *him*?

Jesus answers *that* question when he says, “that they all may be one, **just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you**, that they also may be **in us**.” In other words, Unity is an essential trait of the Holy

Trinity. And, if of the Holy Trinity, then also of the Church that belongs to the Holy Trinity.

We often like to think of salvation as a very individualistic thing; and it is certainly true that *your* salvation is not dependent on whether even your closest loved one in the pew next to you remains faithful unto death, to be given with you the crown of life. *Your* relationship with God is dependent only on Christ Jesus, not Jesus “and” a loved one, or Jesus “and” someone or something else.

But, the life of the Church – though its heart and foundation is that Jesus died on the cross for you – that is not its totality. God has not put you into a relationship *just* with him (as if we all have only individual purposes for being here each Sunday), for Jesus prays concerning us all, “that they may be one”... that’s one *with each other*, not just me with God! One with each other because **we reflect the unity of the Trinity**. One with each other because God is a God of order, not chaos... unity among fellow Christians can never confess ‘chaos.’

Coincidentally, this past week’s Calvary-at-Daily-Prayer included Psalm 133, which begins, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell *in unity*.” For parents, that may evoke thoughts of a calm, quiet household – no fighting among the kids. And that’s not a bad way to think of it! Peace, calm, serenity in the Church! But, unity is not merely about the household being quiet, as if the heavenly Father just wants some rest and we better not give

Him a headache! No, unity is about the divine beauty of being one in doctrine, one in fellowship, one in Christ. The psalm highlights this truth with similes of priestly ordination (those who are to exhort unity of doctrine among the people, those who are to offer up pure sacrifices of thanksgiving, those who are to conduct right worship)... the psalm highlights unity's beauty this way – "It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!" Indeed, how beautiful is (for example) the ordination of a young pastor, an anticipation among and promise for the people he is to serve that the unity of Christ's doctrine will be carried and guarded for another generation.

But the psalm's picture of unity does not end with the unity *this* side of heaven, but continues with images that evoke thoughts of the *other* side of heaven: "It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!" Geographically, Mt. Hermon's snow-capped tops would feed water to the promised land south of it, including those hills on which Jerusalem was built... that Zion that foreshadowed our greater heavenly reality.

So, the 133rd Psalm – "How good and pleasant it is when brothers well in unity" – envisions the same unity Jesus had in mind for His Church *this* side of heaven while she waits for Jesus to bring her to *the other* side of heaven.

In fact, though in our Gospel reading, Jesus uses the word "one" and not "unity" (people can't be more united than being

declared to be “one”)... so, though the word “unity” doesn’t precisely show up in our Gospel reading, Jesus’ prayer gives us reason to consider that word “unity” in the New Testament. Where, in Psalm 133, you have the Hebrew word for unity (*yachad*), its Greek equivalent (ὁμοθυμαδον, “of one mind, of one accord”) is used *eleven* times in the New Testament... *ten* of those eleven times are in the book of Acts, where the early life of the Church – the product and focus of Jesus’ high priestly prayer – is on full display.

For example, in Acts 1, in our First Reading this morning, after the listing of the apostles in the Upper Room, waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus had promised to send from on high, the text says, “All these with one accord (ὁμοθυμαδον) were devoting themselves to prayer.” Again, in chapter 2, speaking of the early church’s devotion to the apostles’ doctrine and the fellowship and the breaking of bread and the liturgical prayers, the text says, “And day by day, they were steadfastly continuing with one accord (ὁμοθυμαδον) in the temple ...” Unity!

And that is true not just for those in Jerusalem, but also to the early Church of Jesus’ work among the believers in Rome, as Paul writes to the Romans, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that **together** (ὁμοθυμαδον) you may with one voice glorify [God].”

Note again how those words of Paul begin: “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony...” That’s a telling statement, not just for the Church’s believers in Rome, but for the Church’s believers in Elgin – “the God of *endurance and encouragement*” – why does Paul need to describe the Lord as such but because the apostle knows we do not always *feel* that sense of unity. We sinners find our *sense* of unity easily undercut, tarnished, chipped away. It may be one Christian just having a bad day and making a passing comment, at which a fellow Christian (caught flat-footed) doesn’t know how to absorb the less-than-harmonious words. It may be the earthly governance of the Church – boards and committees and voters’ assemblies and the work Christians must do therein; it may be daily life in the home or among Christian friends (that’s still the life of *the Church*, isn’t it?... the *daily* life of the Church). In our sin, the irritations gnaw at us and we forget that harmony and unity is not based on our sinful emotion, but on the foundation of us being “in accord with Christ Jesus”... so that unity is safeguard and restored in repentance and the forgiveness of sins... not just “me with God” but confessed with one another. Listen again to how Paul says it: “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with (or, we might say, in unity) with Christ Jesus.”

The foundation of the life of the Church is not the *feelings* of harmony, a sentimental hope that every day every Christian will be

perfectly able to radiate the joy of the gospel and the perfect holiness of God's good will. The foundation of the life of the Church is that He who prays for us is He who saved us *and* He who promised His Holy Spirit... that through the Spirit's work in Word and Sacrament, we may be forgiven, strengthened in our harmony, safeguarded in our unity with Christ and with the Father. On *that* foundation, our faith is united, our minds are united, our hearts are united, so that (as the hymn prays), "With one accord, O God, we pray, grant us Your Holy Spirit. Help us in our infirmity through Jesus' blood and merit. Grant us to grow in grace each day that by this sacrament we may eternal life inherit."

And this baptismal life of the Church, this life that is in one accord with Christ Jesus, this life that is defined by Jesus' blood and merit, this life that is sustained by the gifts that pour forth from His blood and merit... this life of unity also leads, if you will, to two subsequent truths, as Jesus himself speaks of them in His prayer:

"I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, **so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me.**"

In other words, that unity with Christ leads to a unity of confessing Him before men – a same-speak (not only voice, but conduct), the united confession of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, that the whole world may know that Jesus is God in the flesh, sent by the Father

who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son... or, as Jesus says it, “You loved them even as you loved me.”

That’s the first consequence of this life of unity in the Church – the world is not distracted by schisms and heresies and the ‘necessary evil’ of arguments defending against false doctrine; instead, the world may be singularly focused to the united and joyful confession that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, including *them* and *you* and *me*... to save us all and pour out the benefits of His cross to us in Word and Sacrament until He comes again and takes us unto himself.

And *that* is the second consequence of this life of unity in the Church: a focus on the glory that awaits all who belong to God in the unity of Christ Jesus. How does Jesus pray?

“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

Unity *with the ascended Christ*! To be unveiled to sight when Christ comes again in glory. A wondrous goal, a wondrous ‘tomorrow’! But, entirely out of our grasp if the unity depended upon our own strength and will-power. So, rejoice that Christ prays for you, for He and the Father, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus – to be in one accord, in perfect unity, with the one true God, into Whom you have been baptized and named, by Whom you are strengthened and together sustained, and to Whom

you will one day ascend in the glory of the resurrection and the life
of the world to come.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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