

That They May All Be One

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Gospel reading. **Jesus prayed, “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.”** Here ends our text.

Critics of Christianity will often say, “If Christianity is true, why are there so many different denominations? How do you expect me to believe in this Jesus, if you can’t even agree among yourselves about what he taught? Just here in America there are Baptist and Methodist, Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox and Lutheran, Episcopal and Presbyterian, Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ, Nazarene and Pentecostal churches. And many of those denominations even have their own subdivisions. Why don’t your Christians get your act together? Come to an agreement and then maybe I’ll take a look at your Jesus.” And do you know what? Those critics are right. How can we expect people to come to faith in Christ when we send them a mixed message? When we aren’t one?

And these differences are not minute. We don’t just disagree about some externals, vestments or the shape of our church buildings, but about important theological doctrines. We disagree about whether we’re saved by God’s grace alone or grace plus our merit, faith in Christ alone or faith plus our works. We disagree about whether man is born dead in sin or whether he has a little goodness in himself that can help him along. Whether his sinful nature can’t believe on his own or whether he can choose to believe with his own reason. We disagree whether God died for us and shed his blood or whether it was just the human nature of Jesus. We disagree about whether baptism saves us or not, whether to baptize infants or not, whether it is Christ’s body and blood in his Supper or not. We disagree about the end times. Will Christ return once to judge the living and the dead, or will he first come to set up an earthly kingdom? Is there only heaven or hell, or do we get a second chance if we manage to make it to purgatory? Christians are not united in belief. We are not one. And how can others believe in Jesus when we send a mixed message?

This is why Jesus prayed that we might all be one. On the night when he was betrayed, when he was still gathered with his disciples for the Lord’s Supper, Jesus prayed to his Father in his office of priest. He interceded for his disciples. He first prayed for his twelve disciples, minus Judas. But then he also prayed for us. Jesus prayed, “I do not ask for these only,” meaning just the disciples, “but also for those who *will* believe in me through their word.” Jesus was praying for all future Christians, those who would believe in him. Jesus was praying for us. And what did Jesus pray? “That they may all be one.” For what reason? “So that the world may believe that you have sent me.” So that the world may also believe in Jesus. Jesus prayed that we Christians might all be one so that others might see our unity and also believe in Christ for their salvation.

Of course, Jesus foresaw that this unity would be a problem. That’s why he prayed for us, that we would all be one. No one prays for something that won’t be needed. Jesus foresaw that there would be all kinds of disagreement and divisions in Christendom. This would be a terrible witness to the world. It would hinder mission efforts and evangelism. “Which kind of Christian are you? Why should I believe you when your Christian brother says something else?”

And so over the years all kinds of attempts have been made to establish Christian unity. One attempt is what I call the big tent. Instead of bringing people into the tent of Christianity, we just extend our tent to cover them. They can stay right where they are. They don’t have to move an inch. In the sixth and seventh centuries, Christian missionaries brought the Gospel from Rome into northern Europe. Their strategy was to convert the local barbarian king and all his subjects would fall in line. But what about all the pagan gods they worshipped? “Well, you don’t have to worry about that. That god of the trees you worshiped as Thor is really saint Peter. You can pray to him instead. And we have a boatload of saints we can assign to your other gods as well.” They just extended the tent of Christianity to cover the local religion, and thousands of pagans were baptized into the Christian church. Everyone became Christian, at least in name. It was Christian unity by inclusiveness. And this happens today. We hand people a plate of cake and a glass of punch and while they’re preoccupied we build the tent of Christianity over top of them. They might become concerned and say, “What’s all this?” And we answer, “Don’t worry. Just stay right where you are. You’re in the Christian church now.” “But don’t I need to repent or something?” “No need for that. Just keep on doing whatever you’re doing and believe whatever you think is right. You can have your cake and eat it too. We’ll keep you entertained with our three-ring circus of worship that appeals to everybody.” It’s unity by the big tent of inclusiveness.

Seventh Sunday of Easter - May 29, 2022

Another attempt at unity is simply to agree to disagree. “Yes, we have our differences in belief, we acknowledge that they’re there, but let’s not let those things get in our way. We can accept multiple beliefs about one teaching. Let’s agree to have fellowship between our pulpits and at our altars. And if anyone complains that they prefer the taste of apples to oranges, tell them that they’re both fruit and, therefore, they’re really the same. A toast to unity. We agree to disagree.”

Of course, sometimes this agreement to disagree can’t be persuaded by schizophrenic theologians. Sometimes kings and emperors have arisen to force this unity. “You Lutherans get together with the Catholics at Augsburg. You Lutherans and Reformed are now one state church. It’s the Prussian Union. Any dissenters are free to flee the country or go directly to jail, recant or make an appointment with my executioner.”

But none of these attempts at false unity are what Jesus prayed for. You see, Jesus didn’t pray that all the world would be one. But Jesus prayed that those who believe in him *through the word of the apostles* would be one. And that’s really our point of difference and disagreement, the word of the apostles. Is it because the word of the apostles’ recorded in the Scriptures is unclear and ambiguous? No. Scripture is clear. But the problem is when we say we believe the word of the apostles, plus or minus. We believe the word of the apostles *plus* continuing revelation and enlightenment. The popes are continuing to receive additional revelation from God. And this is how we get purgatory, and saint veneration, and papal infallibility, and celibate priests, mostly. This is how we get TV evangelists who say, “God spoke to me and told me to tell you to send your money to this address.” This is how people say, “Our culture is more enlightened now. The apostles are out of date. Enjoy whatever lifestyle you prefer.” *Or* we believe the word of the apostles *minus* whatever our own reason can’t accept. “How could God create by his word alone without evolutionary processes? How can babies have faith? How can Jesus put his body and blood in bread and wine? How can a man forgive sins?” But Jesus didn’t pray that those who believe *some* of the word of the apostles, plus or minus, would be one. He prayed that “those who believe in me *through their word* would be one.” This is the true unity of belief that Jesus prayed for.

At every Divine worship service, we confess, “I believe . . .” But we say this together. We confess the Creeds. We confess the Apostles’ Creed not because it was written by the apostles but because it confesses the teaching of the apostles in Holy Scripture. We also confess the Nicene Creed. We say together, “I believe in *one* holy Christian and *apostolic* Church.” We believe that our church *is* built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles who received God’s word through revelation and the mouth of Jesus, and who wrote it down through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And whenever this faith, this teaching, is challenged by heretics who confess only some of the apostles’ word, plus or minus, or by kings and governments who try to force a shotgun marriage of truth and falsehood, we write another creed, another confession. We write, “This is what the apostles taught and what we believe. This is what the apostles didn’t teach and what we don’t believe.” In this way we wrote our Lutheran Confessions. Some critics have said that being so specific in all the details of our faith will only bring division and disagreement. But history has shown it to bring unity of belief, the true unity that Jesus prayed for when he asked his Father that all those who believe in him through the apostles’ word would be one.

Every year we receive new members into our congregation by youth or adult confirmation, by profession of faith or transfer. The main reason they join our church is not because our congregation is friendly, though it is. Not because of a nice church building in a beautiful setting, though it is. Not because they have friends and family here, though they might. And not even because of the tasty pastries after church, though there are. But they join our baptized and communicant membership because they believe in Jesus through the word of the apostles’ and seek to be one with us in this faith and confession.

Now there are many things we do in our church and plan to do that help build our unity here at Trinity Darmstadt. We have fellowship events and dinners and administrative meetings of council and voters and committees. These things build our friendships and comradery as we plan and work side by side. But what truly builds our unity is our fellowship around the Word and Sacraments of our Lord, given to us through the word of the apostles. When we gather for Bible study and Bible class, when we gather in our worship to hear the word of the apostles read and preached and then confessed together, when we gather at this altar as one body to make a public proclamation of our common faith – these are the things that truly build our unity, that make us one. This is the unity that Jesus prayed for, and this is the unity that the world will see that they may also believe in Jesus. In this way we don’t send a mixed message, some of the apostles’ word, plus or minus, agreeing to disagree, or some kind of artificial unity. We preach and teach the word of the apostles and bring them *into* the tent of Christianity that we may all be one. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.