

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for The Seventh Sunday of Easter
June 5, 2011
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Jesus' high priestly prayer for all his followers is a prayer about unity. The unity for which he prays does not refer to some absolute conformity or to an absence of differences of opinion. The unity for which Jesus prays is unity in relationships – a oneness of heart that binds diverse spirits together. It wouldn't be a bad idea for us to memorize this portion of Jesus' prayer and let our relationships be guided by it. For us to conduct our relationships in a manner consistent with the prayer of Jesus makes our claim to be his followers believable and gives credibility to our witness.

This is true in the pursuit of unity among Christian churches. One of the greatest contributions toward Christian unity in the past 400 years is the ecumenical work that produced a lectionary that is shared by major Christian churches. It is encouraging to be reminded that the gospel passage we just heard is being read today in tens of thousands of other places across the lines that divide us. It helps us feel solidarity with Christians in other traditions. It is also sad because we know there are still barriers between us, not the least of which concerns the Lord's Table. It is scandalous that we will all hear this prayer of Jesus today, prayed for us, but after we finish preaching on its subject, many of us must still go to separate altars.

But Christian unity, especially involving sharing of the Body and Blood of our Lord, is more important than the hierarchies and hurts and doctrinal peculiarities of any "party" of Christians. Why? Our Lord expressed why in his prayer - because we are in the world to show forth his glory, to do his work, and to express in our own manner of living the oneness expressed in the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And all this, so that the world might believe – might know and trust the one who came to redeem us! When you and I involve ourselves in sharing our faith with a sister or brother in another part of Christ's Body, we take a small but very important *relational* step toward a greater unity and become a part of the answer to Christ's beautiful prayer, "that they may be one."

Unity of relationships is important to congregational life as well. Catherine de Hueck Doherty, founder of Madonna House in Canada, has written a very interesting thing. She says:

"I know the price of making a family out of human beings, both a blood family and a spiritual family. The price is high, but so was the price that Christ paid for us. We have to be like seeds in his hands, cast out to the four winds by the Spirit into the soil he has chosen. The harvest he desires is primarily unity among yourselves. Then strangers will come and cease to be strangers, because your family, your community of love, will encompass them and heal them after it has healed you."

In our relationships with one another we have experienced that for which our Lord prayed. It has healed us and thus has healed others. The more of this unity we have the better our participation in the liturgy will be and this house will be full. The more of this unity we have, the better our stewardship will be and there will be abundant resources to do all the things we know God is calling us to do. The more of this unity we have, the more effective our service to others will be. Our most effective witness to this community, to our denomination, and to the world, is the spirit of unity among ourselves in this unbelievably diverse and intricately textured congregation. No one of us or small group can do it alone.

It's for all of us to experience and enjoy and, in so doing, make our witness credible. There is indeed a beautiful spirit of unity in this parish family. It is attractive and inviting. That's why we are growing in numbers, in participation, and in miraculous spiritual ways. Everybody has enough estrangement in their world. So, when people seek a spiritual home, they want one where people dwell in unity and peace. There are people here who would tell you that they are alive today because God led them to us. If we had been preoccupied and distracted with internal conflicts or external threats, we could not have made the vital difference in their lives. Christ is beckoning all his sisters and brothers into a deeper unity in our relationships as those who have been baptized into Christ, who have died with him so that we might rise with him to the new life where unity overcomes estrangement.

Ultimately this principle of unity in relationships has its beginning and its end in our relationship with the Risen and Ascended Lord. Jesus and the Father are one with the promised Holy Spirit. There is a perfect unity in their relationship. Jesus prayed then and continues to pray that we will have that same perfect unity with him.

When we are one with Christ, barriers fall, distinctions between persons become unimportant, differences in doctrine take second place, and disagreements are resolved. Our witness to the Church at home and abroad takes on a glory and a power we never knew before. Our efforts in the areas of peace and justice bear fruit. We do not "accomplish" that unity. No, in fact, in most cases we are addicted to behavior that resists and undermines it. The unity Christ desires for his Church comes through grace, in answer to his prayer, to those who will receive it. It involves being receptive to the possibility of reconciliation that is just too much for us to accomplish on our own.

In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom tells how she and her sister Betsy were interned at the Nazi camp at Ravensbruck. Betsy died there, and Corrie dreaded the day when, after the war, she might encounter one of their captors. It happened one day in Munich, where Corrie was giving her testimony at a rally. There was a former SS officer there who had stood guard at the showers in the camp. Corrie looked up and suddenly he was facing her.

"How grateful I am for your message, fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" The man thrust out his hand to Corrie, but she could not take it. She felt shame and guilt coursing through her body. "Lord Jesus," she prayed, "forgive me and help me to forgive him." But nothing happened. There was no warmth or forgiveness in her. Again she prayed, "Jesus, I cannot forgive him; give me your forgiveness." Struggling with herself, she took the man's hand. And as she did, she says "the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that overwhelmed me." Jesus asks us to overcome whatever divides us from one another, and then gives us the only power in the universe capable of doing what he asks us to do. Oneness among ourselves is the fruit of Christ's oneness with us.

John's gospel is permeated with the idea of the indwelling Christ. All creation is by and in Christ. There is no more intimate relationship than this. It is the one relationship that we must have if life is to be worth living. It is the glory of life transformed, redeemed, and made holy. As we seek this relationship with Christ, we are compelled to seek the same kind of relationship with one another. Then, we become living answers to his high priestly prayer for our oneness. Or, as the decree on ecumenism from Vatican II expresses it: "Cooperation among all Christians vividly expresses that bond which already unites them and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant."