



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

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

For the past several weeks, in our Gospel readings, Jesus has been telling the disciples that he would be leaving them. They hear reminders of the love Jesus has for them, and the love they are to have for each other. They are given Jesus' peace and the promise of the Holy Spirit to help them, especially during the transition time to come. But yet, I still don't think that they really grasp what is about to happen. Jesus is eventually leaving this earth and going to heaven to sit at the right hand of his Father. The disciples are going to have to go it alone. Jesus will not be there teaching, encouraging, and loving them. They will forever be physically separated from Jesus, their leader, and their Lord.

This happened three days ago at the Ascension of Our Lord, according to the common lectionary we follow. This was the last time the disciples would see Jesus on earth. Christ's return to the Father proved that our faith is not based on a glimpse of God in some mystic encounter with our risen Lord. Our risen Lord has simply returned to the Father to take His place of honor, seated at God's right hand.

I do wish that the Ascension of our Lord would generate a little more attention in the life of the church. It is not remembered even as much as such national holidays like Thanksgiving, Mother's Day, Father's Day. Maybe it is because Hallmark has not gone into the business of making Ascension Day cards. And since it is on a Thursday, we do not celebrate this important festival of the church very often.

Remember, that for the 40 days after Easter, our Lord has appeared to the disciples. He was crucified, died, buried, and resurrected, yet the disciples still have encounters with Jesus. But today's Gospel reading turns the clock back again to the time prior to Jesus' death on the cross. It is actually a long prayer. All of Chapter 17 is Jesus' prayer to His Father in heaven for the disciples, for you, and for me. It is called the High Priestly Prayer. This prayer by Jesus just prior to his death intercedes with God on behalf of the disciples, present and future, that's us. In fact, we should probably think of this prayer, rather than "Our Father" as the Lord's Prayer. Jesus in it, pours out his heart to the Father. The "Our Father" would be better called the Model Prayer or Disciple's Prayer because it is a prayer that Jesus gave us to pray. John 17's prayer is sometimes even called

Jesus' Last Will and Testament, because it represents Jesus' provision for the disciples' needs on the eve of his death.

And so, with those thoughts in mind, we could talk about many things from this portion of the prayer this morning. So let me for a few minutes mention an important theme. We hear that Jesus asks, "that they may all be one". This request is for all disciples, that they may be united as the Father and Son are united. His hope is that if the world can see that we are one, then the world will come to believe that it is true, that Jesus was sent by the Father. That is the way that Jesus wants to see us in the world even today and why he makes this intercession on our behalf.

This really seems like a safe request, to be one. Jesus wants his disciples to be one in a world that is marked by countless division of peoples. This division, the opposite of unity, is why groups of people other than those united by Jesus, often rise up against each other. Tensions arise and we have conflict. Christians get caught in those divisions and that is not what Jesus wants for us. He wants unity among His followers.

With this statement or request to God, Jesus is making a mandate for the abolishment of all division which set one group of people against another. Christian unity is not intended by Jesus a house rule, or a church rule, but it is meant to be witnessed to in the world. Unity with God and each other is our charter in the ELCA Lutheran church.

The presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Elizabeth Eaton calls for us to be "church together". She is not meaning the ELCA only, but all Christian churches should align to show the world that we are one in Jesus Christ. It is after all, His church on earth that we are a part of. But how does the world think about the Lutheran church? No doubt they are confused as there are so many kinds of Lutherans out there: ELCA, Missouri, WELS, LCMC. If we cannot even, get those who follow Luther together in unity how will we get all Christians on board? No wonder the world looks at organized religion with skepticism. So, give some thought as to how we unite as one in Jesus if we continue to abide by our own man-made rules?

Well, St Paul caught this message, and he echoes it when he declares, in his letter to the Galatians, that in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one." We have a clue here in Scripture that the unity of Christians cannot be separated by these three causes dominant in the world today: ethnicity, social status, or gender. He does not try to abolish such characteristics but rather insists that for Christians these are no longer factors that separate Christians from each other. We are all one in Christ regardless of our ethnic background, how much money we have or our sexual orientation. This folks, represents the new order that Jesus has brought about. We are to be reconciled and united as the body of Christ. There shall be no barriers to anyone who wants to be one with us in Jesus. No antagonism any longer, but rather these differences bring enrichment for everybody.

So, do you think that this is a concern today? You bet it is. There are things I see on the TV, in the news or real life that leads me to believe that in our country today racism is still alive. Do you agree? Sometimes I think I am back to the 1960's with Father Groppi and race riots in Milwaukee. Have you heard the statement, "Driving While Black"? Well, believe me that in some locations, it is an offense to just be behind the wheel if you are an African American. Or how about the people trying to cross our borders, seeking freedom and a better life for their families. How are they treated in our country today? They speak a different language, and their skin and hair are a little bit different in color than us Scandinavian folks. Do you turn your gaze toward a man wearing a turban

or a yamika? How are they thought about? Or the exchange students studying at Harvard? Not getting political, but just think about ways that people in American are divided by ethnicity!

Next questions is, are people in today's world divided by social class? I believe that is true as well. When is the last time you were invited to a black-tie social event? There is a growing gap between the rich and poor right here in the US, right here in Park Falls. I see this as people come to the food pantry on Saturday mornings. I see it in the faces of seniors as they put groceries back on the shelf after they check the price. Is it true that the rich are getting richer and the poor getting poorer in our world?

And lastly, do you think that people in this world are divided by gender? Listen to the news of the Shawn P Ditty Combs trial. Women are still victimized as sex slaves, both bought and sold. Lawsuits are filed for sexual discrimination in courts all over our country. Ah, a woman can be a pastor but only in some of the Lutheran denominations today!

And these are only three, the three examples of separation that Jesus alludes to in His prayer to the Father. And according to our discrimination laws there are many more.

Prayer to the Father for all peoples to be one was a dangerous business. Jesus lived what he preached and prayed. He was nailed to a cross for this ideal that all should be one with Christ. Jesus worked hard while on earth to unite us, as the devil works hard to divide us from each other and from Jesus. Evil in the world is so real, that we should talk about it more. We need to band together as one in Christ to send him packing. Unity multiplies the power of our witness. Whereas a divided church loses persuasive force. I read this week this statement, "While the current model of competing denominations diminishes our witness, it is also true that our love from Christians across denomination lines offsets that, at least in part. If we are sorry for the disunities that plague us, let us also be glad for the unity that blesses us."

And so, this is the good news, that Jesus gives us the glory, the same glory that he got from his Father. And as Christians in the world today, we receive it with open arms. It is God's glory that we can share with all others. Another gracious gift from God, no different than the gifts of love and peace that we talked about recently. It is by taking up our crosses and following Jesus that we share in his glory, with all people from all denominations.

We also have a special meal that Jesus has prepared for us, the Eucharist. It allows us to remember and have the presence of Jesus come alive for us for all time. Together we are one at this amazing table filled with God's grace. This meal strengthens us to overcome our differences and to be one with Him.

Folks that is not always easy. I mentioned things or differences that can tear us apart like ethnicity, social status, and sexual orientation. And there are many more differences that our church recognizes divide us. But Jesus sees us as one, and rejecting all these barriers both old and new, will be the start of unity in Christ. The Holy Spirit calls us to be one, one bread and one body. Yes, it can be challenging but as Jesus himself indicates, it is only by our unity, our no nonsense embrace of one another, that all the world will come to believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior. AMEN

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!