

Text: John 17:20-26

<sup>20</sup>“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, <sup>21</sup>that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup>I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me. 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.

<sup>24</sup>“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.

<sup>25</sup>“Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup>I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

The men who founded our country had a pretty radical vision. They envisioned a country that was ruled by the people themselves – not a monarchy, where one person had complete authority, not even an oligarchy, where all the power lay with just a few select aristocrats. Instead, the people would be self-governing. All the citizens of this country would come together to choose their own leaders, who could all be replaced the next go-round. To ensure that was how it worked, they developed a unique idea of “united states.” It wasn’t to be just a loosely organized group of completely independent states, and wasn’t a government that was dominated by a centrally located power, like a dictatorship, but instead was something kind of in between. Those ideas are summed up in a phrase that’s on every coin that our country produces – “E Pluribus Unum.” Remember what it means? “Out of many, one.” Out of many states, one country. Out of many people, one nation. It’s a great thought, but is it true anymore? Often it doesn’t really seem like it. Red state vs. blue state, rich vs. poor, east coast vs. west coast, with our little ‘fly-over country’ in between, north vs. south, black vs. white, and any of dozens of other ways that we have become a very fragmented society. ‘E Pluribus Unum’ is a nice thought; I just don’t know how true it is anymore.

Couldn’t we say some very similar things about the church? There’s one God, one Savior, one cross, one way to the one heaven.

Shouldn’t there then just be one church? I’m not talking about the Buddhists and Muslims and Mormons; I’m talking about the Christian Church – shouldn’t there be only one? I mean, just this week we celebrated the Ascension, and when Jesus sent his disciples out right before he ascended, I don’t think he told them, “Now Andrew, you go start the Episcopalian Church, and James, you start the Methodists and Philip the Pentecostals and Matthew the Lutherans.” He said “you will be my witnesses,” and they all saw the same thing. So why the fragmenting of the Christian church? Not to go all Rodney King on you here, but can’t we all just get along?

There are really two reasons that we can’t. One of them is false teaching. When we know that the Bible teaches that Jesus has done everything for our salvation, that we are can’t do anything to contribute, how could we be united with people who teach that Jesus did most of it, but you have to do your part, too, to pay for your sins – like the Catholics teach? When we know that the Bible teaches that Baptism creates faith and new life inside even a little baby, how could we be united with people who teach that Baptism doesn’t do any of that, that it’s just a nice dedication ceremony – like the Baptists teach? When other Lutherans teach that homosexuality is a perfectly acceptable lifestyle, that’s going to cause a division. Straying from what Jesus taught is one of the big reasons for the fragmenting of the church. At this point you could easily say, “Good for us. We don’t teach anything false, so it’s all someone else’s problem.” But before we get all self-righteous, are there other ways, that we splinter the church? How about the way we talk about that other member of the church, making them look bad – doesn’t that cause a division in the church? How about those ways we treat other people from our church, doesn’t that often cause divisions? How about the times when an innocent difference of opinion between members turns into a less-than-innocent argument? With our lovelessness and gossip, we too can contribute to the fracturing of the church.

That’s not how Jesus wants it to be. In the verses of our text, Jesus is praying for us, praying “that all of them may be one,” and “that they may be one as we are one” – speaking of him and his Father in heaven – and “may they be brought to complete unity.” At least three different times in just these 6 verses, Jesus prays that all of his followers might be one. Sort of a Christian of ‘E Pluribus Unum.’ So how do we get that? Well, people for years have been trying to unify the church. And most often, their solution is pretty simple. Just take whatever divides you, and ignore it. That’s really the motto of a whole lot of groups today. They have essentially agreed to disagree. But can we do that? What part of God’s Word does Jesus say that we’re free to disagree with? Think of the Great Commission, Matthew 28: “Go and make disciples of all

nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey...most of the things I have commanded you?" No, everything. Jesus seemed to think everything God said was important, so we probably should, too. So just ignoring the things that divide us doesn't seem to be the answer. What is the answer? Jesus gives us some clues in our text. "May they be in us...that they may be one as we are one, I in them...in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." The key to growing together as a church, is growing closer to Christ. When we are all growing closer to Jesus, then we will naturally also be growing closer to each other. And that starts with repentance. That starts by honestly looking at our reflection in the mirror of God's law, and admitting that we are to blame – not everybody else, no 'they started it,' but me, I did it; it was my sin. Once God's law has exposed our sin, then God's gospel can wash it away. We take all of our sins and bring them to the cross, and lay them at Jesus' feet, and hear Jesus say, "My son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven. Every single one of your sins, I have paid for. You are now right with God. Go in peace." And we walk away from the cross clean, as white as wool. And we walk away from the cross with a renewed sense of purpose, resolved to live as one of God's children, resolved to tell as many people as we can about this good news that Jesus has given to us. There is salvation, even for the worst of sinners! All people need to hear that there is a way to escape the punishment that we deserve, and that way is Jesus.

And isn't that really what Christian education is all about? (We're here on Christian Education Sunday, after all, so we have to make sure to bring that in) We want to tell the world about the good news of salvation through Jesus, but not all of us are going to go out into the world. So what can we do? Tell your children. Tell your grandchildren, nieces, nephews, friend's children, the children of your congregation. That's Christian Education. My parents were never going to be world missionaries. My dad, my grandpa, they both worked in factories. They were never going to be able to tell hundreds, thousands of people about what Jesus has done. But in a way, that's exactly what they did. Because they told me. They sent me here, to a school where I was prepared to do just about anything I could have wanted to do for a living, but more importantly, I was trained for eternity. The love of Jesus was placed in my heart, and took root. And that root sprouted and grew until now, God uses me to bring the gospel to hundreds of people every week, and thousands of people over the past 15 years. Through Christian Education, through the work of my parents and St. Matthew School, I was united with the church, and with Jesus, as Jesus' prayer to his Father came true: "In order that the love you have for me may be in them, and that I myself may be in them." And that is still bearing fruit today.

Christian Education is incredibly important for the spread of the Gospel, the salvation of souls and the unity of the church. And whose job is it? We can go wrong in two ways on that one. Some say that it is mostly the parent's responsibility. But Jesus told his Church to preach and teach all nations, and that certainly includes children, so this is something that Jesus wants his Church to do. But Jesus didn't give this responsibility – this privilege, really – to just the Church. Isn't that how some parents act? They think that their job is to send their kids to a Christian School, to drop them off at Sunday School, and let the church handle it. But Christian Education can't be done without parents. Parents have so much more time with their kids, that if they're not working together, they can pretty easily un-teach whatever the church and school might teach. If one of our teachers talks about the importance of being in church regularly, but Mom and Dad, by their actions, teach that every once in a while is good enough, who do you think the kids will believe? If the pastors talk about the importance of studying God's Word regularly, but parents teach their kids the habit of skipping Bible Study on Sunday mornings (which for our kids we call "Sunday School"), which lesson will the kids more likely learn? Christian education is a shared responsibility, a joint privilege. Both parents and the church get the opportunity to train the next generation in the instruction of the Lord, to tell our children, and the children of our congregation, what amazing things that our God has done for them. We get to tell them about Jesus, to prepare them for eternity, so that – as Jesus says in our text – they might be where he is. Cherish that privilege. Jesus uses you to bring his Word to your children, and to the children of St. Matthew's. Practice Christian education in your home, and support Christian education in the church, in all its forms – St. Matthew School, St. Matthew Sunday School, Lakeside Lutheran, Luther Prep, Martin Luther College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Through Christian education, we get the privilege to bring about a Christian "E Pluribus Unum," that out of many people, from many lands, Jesus makes us one. And we look forward to the full realization of that unity, when we are truly one, in the home that Jesus prepared for us, and is preparing us for, in the glory of heaven. Amen.

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