

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Easter – May 16, 2021 Acts 1:12-26; 1 John 5:9-15; John 17:11b-19

I know it is sort of a geeky pastor thing – but I enjoy reading. I read the Bible of course...but I also enjoy reading those things that are called the common confessions of the Lutheran Church – what is called the Book of Concord. This is made up of a number of documents.

Luther's Small Catechism is one of them...and if there is a Small Catechism, guess what, there is also a Large one.

Theologically the one most of us consider most central is called the Augsburg Confession. This is a confession of faith that the founding fathers of the reformation read out loud in Augsburg Germany, and is understood as one of the cornerstones of what it means to be a Lutheran.

In a time of division, they were looking for a way for Christians to work together. They were not looking to start a new church, but rather, to be a reforming movement within the church universal.

And so they wrote, "It is sufficient for the true unity of the church that the Gospel is rightly taught, and the Sacraments are rightly administered" (Augsburg Confession Article 7).

This is a wonderful statement, one that I hold dear to my heart. But every time I hear it, there is a part of me that feels kind of like a ping-pong ball. They wished to make it clear that the Gospel itself could not be compromised – but that all sorts of other things were not to be held as central.

"I pray that they are one," Jesus said. And back and forth our sinful nature has popped this...between the unity, and egos. Personal desires and church goals fighting against each other.

We fight between the gift of unity given by Christ, and the desires of our own control. Back and forth, between the sides of sinner and saint, between the holiness God gives, and that sinful self – trying to claim and proclaim itself in charge.

"It is sufficient for the true unity of the church that the Gospel is rightly taught, and the Sacraments are rightly administered" (Augsburg Confession Article 7). This is a sacred and holy statement. It is a word from the mouths of some of God's people, trying to quiet unnecessary division. Foolish division.

Then Luther and the rest started to narrow down what they meant by "The gospel rightly taught." Then those that followed shortly after them went further and further, becoming more and more doctrinaire.

Eventually some of them came to the point where they said, "If you do not agree with me on every point, then you are not really part of the church. But that was not the goal or understanding in the beginning.

Yes, we Lutherans have had divisions, even within the United States. And we have paid a great price for this. But our roots go to working together – even in spite of differences.

Some teachings really do define who we are, but many are not as important. Some are central, and others are not. And that is true as well on how we live out the faith – our practice as well.

Keeping the main things the main thing was the title of the meeting I attended two weeks ago in San Antonio. There we talked about the unity as well. There were two main things we talked about – Jesus died for us as THE central doctrine...and this central doctrine says that it is only by being joined to Jesus are we saved.

The second is the witness of the scriptures. That witness has led to animosity of the world to believers in Christ – and we experience that centrally today in two issues: Marriage being a lifelong commitment between one man and one woman, and the sacredness of human life beginning at conception.

That is keeping the main thing the main thing.

Unity on everything we teach, surely that isn't what they meant at Augsburg.

There were some wise people who brought this back to what Jesus was talking about, and the Augsburg confession meant.

Unity. That isn't a word having to do with the dogmas of a group of people, but rather has to do with our relationships.

Unity. That means that somehow.... Praise God...that since we are children of God...since we are made members of the family of God through baptism, that we are reborn in Christ.

That is, we are united.

We are brothers and sisters with every other Christian. That is a term of connectedness. It is a word that speaks of how we need to live together as a family.

I may not like my brother or sisters, but I learn to get along with them.

Oh yes, there may be disagreements. You may not like your relatives. But somewhere along the way, you learn to live with them.

It can be strange how we deal with brothers and sisters. A congregation in Paris Texas a friend of mine attends. There were 3 congregations of their flavor in Paris. The fight was over a minor issue, but one family disagreed with the decision, and brought it to their congregational meeting. People lined up for the fight, not based on the facts of the issue, but over who were their friends. It seems that happens way to often.

So that congregation split in two. The group that left said, "you won't do things like we want, so we will take our money, and create a new church." Their particular flavor of Christianity is truly congregational in how they govern themselves, so that is easy to do.

But they couldn't just leave it at that. Someone decided to really mess with their previous congregation. They started going to the mailbox right after the mailman came, and take away the bills from the mailbox. The way this was discovered was when notices were received that electricity and water were going to be turned off.

Now, I know I am only hearing one side of the story.

They were unable to play nice together.

It is a practice for them that the area churches get together every once and a while for social events. I am told that the two groups will not attend at the same time.

Jesus prays that they may be one.

I know families that do that also. It is sad when they do, because Jesus wants us to be one. Jesus actually gave us the gift of being a good, healthy family.

Back and forth we go though.

Then there is the opposite reaction. One group chooses to fight on everything. Another group turns the “oneness” into uniformity in everything.

Some, in reflecting the “oneness” of family did with it exactly what others have done with the “oneness” of doctrine. They said that you must be exactly alike. This is fusion of family.

This is something that you will find in some of the modern cults. You know the ones, where they all dress identically, and are not able to think independently of the group.

Instead of fusing together, we hear the Apostle Paul who regularly called the church a body. And that picture becomes important. Look how God in his wisdom shaped you.

A cell in a finger, and a cell in the heart carry the same genetic information.

But, they become very different in what they do. And they are extremely different in how they look.

The body continues to shape and change. Some of us, it shapes a little large in some areas we wish it didn't (pointing at my stomach).

And some of us the changes may not feel so good as we age.

But a body continues to shape and change. With each cell working together, and doing what it must do. It does this that they may be one.

Then again, God does not leave us there.

Enter the old Adam. That is our human nature, which always wants to be in control.

Jesus prays that we may be one. And so, some begin to call for an organic unity. You know, merger after merger...union after union... where the one group gives up it's unique gifts to the whole body of Christ. Organic unity...unity in structure... where national church bodies say, “well, let's all get together...because that is what Christ wants for us.”

These strange old self-justifying human beings, forcing something to take place, so that power structures may grow.

God calls us again, and reminds us that the unity isn't based on our ecclesiastical – or institutional strength. Our unity comes from focusing on God, and what we have been given in Christ.

Unity.... we are given it. It isn't based on what is only in the here and now. It is given to us.... based on the resurrection of Jesus. We live side by side with all others who call on the name of Jesus, and look to his resurrection for forgiveness of sin.

This is opposed to that old Adam, who wants to make the unity merely by what we are able to do.

Some would see this unity as easy, or as something that would remove you from this world. But contrary to that, Jesus prays for this unity for us. We receive it apart from the world around us. This happens even while we are in this world.

That is very difficult for us to live. We bounce back and forth...between what real unity is, and the unity we want to force.

This is where that bouncing stops though...when it finds its rest in Jesus.

So...difficult as it is for us to live...Jesus himself prays for it.

And yet, focused on the power of God, and not on our own strength...when we are the community of faith.... when we show that relationship we have in the one who gives us breath and life...people are drawn to Jesus.

That is the promise that Jesus gives.

But it is when people see how we live as the body of Christ...how we encourage each other as a family...how we respect one another...how the comforter – the Holy Spirit – lives and breaths among us. It is when we glorify Jesus. And when we really do live as one, that they see the love we have for one another. That is when the church grows.

See what love they have for one another...as well as all other brothers and sisters in Christ.

See what unity they have – while they are so different from one another. See how they can appreciate and encourage the strength of those differences.

See how they are a community – a midst all the disunity around them

See how they comfort one another.

See how they rejoice with one another.

All in order to give praise to Jesus, and not to themselves.

That is a unity that draws others unto itself – and ultimately to Jesus.