

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Year C

May 16, 2010

John 17:20-26

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Concordia Evangelical Lutheran Church

Duluth, Minnesota

We are planning a committal service at the cemetery some weeks after the memorial service. It would be a small event, with only immediate family. I ask if it would be OK if we were to sing a hymn as part of the service. That would be fine, the woman said, one of the daughters of the deceased. I suggest several hymns that would be appropriate and that are very familiar. The daughter says that all of them are OK with her, except that there is one that we cannot sing, because one of her sisters does not like it.

It is five minutes before the wedding. Everything has gone smoothly up until now. Suddenly I hear the bride in the hallway outside my study sobbing; she is weeping uncontrollably. I rush to her to ask what was the matter. Her brother, who is estranged from her mother, has just walked in and has taken a seat in the sanctuary. She had thought, in planning her wedding, that it would be either her mother or her brother at her wedding, but not both.

A man is lying on his deathbed, with his family gathering around. Death is imminent. The man is weeping, not because he is afraid to die. On the contrary, he has lived a full life, and he is anticipating seeing his beloved wife who has gone before him, joining her on the other side, on another shore, in a greater light, the light of Christ. Rather, he is weeping because he is leaving behind a family that is fractured, a family that cannot come together, even at the death of their father.

Our gospel for today is the conclusion to what is known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. It concludes a long monologue of Jesus to his disciples, preparing them for what is to come. What is to come immediately is his arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. What is to come in the longer term is the life of discipleship under the power and guidance of the Spirit, the Advocate, who comes to remind us of what Jesus has said and done.

What does Jesus pray for? That all those who follow him might be one. Jesus prays that, as he and the Father are one, so too might those who follow might be one. And our being one is not for our own sake, but rather so that the world might know that God has sent Jesus and that Jesus is the one who makes God known.

I was sitting with my Great Aunt Helen as she lay dying in the nursing home. I pulled my chair up close, in part so that she might hear me better—she wasn't wearing her hearing aids—and also because the curtain was drawn between her bed and her roommate's, making for tight quarters. I had my hymnal and I was singing songs to her—many, many songs. Helen's eyes were closed and she was unresponsive; I didn't know if she could hear me or not. I continued to sing. Finally, her roommate from the other side of the curtain shouted, "Would you please stop that singing!" I didn't know if she had become weary of hearing my voice or if I was singing the *wrong* songs.

I remembered that scene in Helen's room many years ago when the daughter of the deceased woman said that there was one song we could not sing during the committal because her sister did not like it.

C.S. Lewis, the great British writer and theologian, is said to have not liked hymn singing. That's difficult for me to believe, since he spent almost all of this time in Oxford and Cambridge, England, home to some of the finest hymn and choral singing in the world. C.S. Lewis is said to

have referred to the songs that congregations sing their “war songs,” as our various hymn traditions tend to define us and also divide us.

Jesus prays that those who follow him—those who century after century call themselves Christians—would be one. I can imagine that Jesus has often wept over us, his children, in our bickering and quarreling amongst ourselves. There has been much written in the opinion pages of our local newspapers about the sexuality issue, in particular. It seems the most pointed and even vitriolic of those words have been written by those calling themselves Christians against others who call themselves Christians. It has been noteworthy that other voices, not even claiming to be Christian, have taken us to task over this public display of infighting.

Jesus prays for the unity of the church, not for our sake, but for the sake of those outside the church, that they might believe that Jesus comes from God, and that Jesus makes God known.

Today we are excited to receive and publicly welcome new members. Some are becoming members as of today, while others have joined recently. As I was having conversations with our new members, one of them asked, “What are the expectations of membership?” I responded with our Mission Statement: “To know Christ Jesus and the power of his resurrection.” I said, “This is the quest that all of us at Concordia are about, and that this quest is for a lifetime.”

A somewhat longer answer to the question, “What are the expectations of membership?” might be to embrace the affirmations and promises that we will all make together in a few minutes in the Affirmation of Baptism. Our unity as a congregation is expressed in these affirmations and promises. Herein lies our unity with the whole Christian church across time and space.

Lutheran pastor, teacher, and poet, Gerhard Frost, once said, “It takes the whole church to say the name, ‘Jesus.’” As various denominations, we express our love of God differently, as our experiences of God in our lives differ from one another. We need the whole spectrum of Christianity to express the love of God for the world. Our unity as Christians is not in the hymns we sing or don’t sing; it’s not in the liturgies we sing or don’t sing; it’s not in our church architecture or hierarchy or congregational polity. Our unity is in Christ. And we proclaim Christ to the world when we are able, through the love of God living within us, to demonstrate that love to one another and to the world.

We are at the cemetery, and the graveside committal service has just concluded. It is a holy time; there is the sense that the family of the deceased wants to capture this moment and hold onto it, so that it might last. One of the daughters of the deceased woman pages through the song sheets and suggests we sing another one of the songs. One of her sisters says, “No, I don’t like that one.” “OK. Let’s sing another one,” the first sister says. And we do. When we finish, there is weeping and embracing. The love they share, demonstrated towards one another, is a powerful witness to me of the love of their mother.

Jesus’ prayer to his Father is that those who follow him might be one, and that we might demonstrate the love of God to the world.

Thanks be to God!