

Gospel: John 17:20-26

Jesus prays that the life of his followers will be characterized by an intimate unity of identity with God. To be so identified with God means also to share in God's mission: to proclaim the word that will bring others into this same unity.

[Jesus prayed:] ²⁰"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

²⁵"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Today is the final Sunday of our liturgical Easter season, which means next week is Pentecost. In some ways it may seem unusual to hear us say together in worship: “Jesus Christ has risen – he has risen indeed - Alleluia” on June 2nd. Perhaps Easter seems like a distant memory at this point, but in the church, we celebrate this season of Easter for 50 days. This is based on some scripture references and we want to celebrate a season of resurrection that exceeds the time period of the 40-day season of Lent, partly because resurrection triumphs the crucifixion. Every year on the last Sunday of Easter, the seventh Sunday, all of our three liturgical years share a reading from the same chapter of a Gospel. By liturgical year I mean this: In mainline Christianity most faiths participate in a three-year common lectionary cycle that each year features one of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, that serves to guide us throughout that year as we follow the footsteps of Jesus. The fourth Gospel, John’s Gospel is used to sort of fill in the gaps. On the seventh Sunday of Easter in every liturgical year we read a passage from the 17 chapter of John. This year we heard verses 20 -26. This chapter is called Jesus’s high priestly prayer, and some refer to it as the farewell prayer of Jesus. It is a prayer about unity of the gospel, the unity of faith, the unity of Jesus with God, and the unity of our mission. In these words, Jesus prays for us to recognize our oneness with God.

One observation about this prayer from Jesus is that Jesus does not pray that we may have unity, Jesus prays that we may recognize that our unity already exists with God. His prayer is for us that we may recognize that relationship with God and with one another. To really get a sense of this passage, the entire chapter needs to be read together. However, one of the major focuses is unity.

Unity is still a major word for us today. In fact, we probably talk about its opposite, “division” almost on a daily basis these days when it comes to our country and the differing views of political perspectives. It does seem readily apparent that we have a strong divisiveness that impacts our world view.

Coming off our Memorial Day weekend, I share a story about General Douglas MacArthur who has often been lifted up as a great military leader. MacArthur was highly thought of in Washington DC and was regarded as a very influential figure. However, he also had a reputation for at times being cold and even arrogant. So, in the concern about him being able to identify with others, and not trying to come across as being better than everyone else, and also wanting to show his in unity with other soldiers in the armed forces, his public relations people came up with an idea. They would have him review a contingent of veteran soldiers. In the middle of the review, they would have him suddenly recognize an enlisted man who had served under him during the war. His advisors thought it would be a tremendously moving and a great human moment and they told MacArthur that it would show a compassion side and that he did pay attention to those around him regardless of rank. So out of the hundreds of men lined up for his inspection he would suddenly pick out a single individual call him by his name and recall a past campaign with them. MacArthur agreed with the plan. So they set up the inspection and chose their veteran. The lucky soldier would be unaware that he was going to be singled out for this honor. They went through the army records and found out everything they could about this fellow, as well as precisely where he would be standing in the line, when MacArthur walked by. To be on the safe side they had one of his aides set to nudge MacArthur discreetly when he was in front of the

proper soldier. It all went off like clockwork. MacArthur saluted all the veterans and the general began his march along the line of the soldiers. At the right moment the aide gave MacArthur the nudge. MacArthur halted. He turned around and looked at the man standing still at attention in front of him. MacArthur boomed out: "Jones! I know you, we were together overseas - you are Corporal Jones. I remember serving with you." The soldier looked stunned, and startled then he eventually gazed up, and with a puzzled expression said, "oh and who are you?"

How do we recognize unity today? How do we show unity these days? How do we stay unified even when we disagree? Does unity mean we must agree on every single aspect of something and order to stay unified? In some ways it can be like the word "peace" we heard about last Sunday. It is hard sometimes to embrace that unity when we disagree on certain aspects of life. Perhaps the church is one of those places where people take subsequent actions when something happens that they do not agree with.

Maybe you've seen the old parody about church participation and being a fair-weather baseball fan. It begins: "I'm giving up baseball I've quit going to the ball park once and for all and here are my reasons. 1. I hate to wait in a traffic after the game. 2. The people I sat next to didn't seem friendly. 3. The seats were hard. 4. I went to many games but the manager never came the call on me. 5. The umpires made decisions I didn't agree with. 6. The game went into extra endings and I was late getting home. 7. The music they played between the innings I never heard before and it wasn't my style. 8. It seems the games are always scheduled when I want to do other things. 9. I suspect I sat next to some hypocrites because all

they did was talk through the whole game. And finally, 10. I was taken to too many games by my parents when I was young.

Well of course that is tongue in cheek, however it can reveal sometimes our own approach to certain things when we may be tempted to become lackadaisical about the Church in general but is also can be used when we disagree with things. It seems sometimes we apply a harder litmus test to certain organizations. Sometimes I wonder why we don't use the same microscope when we think about other places in which we have disagreements. We allow our kids to play for teams and clubs that we are not in 100% agreement with. We often work for a company in which we don't agree with every decision they make. We belong to a home owners association, but we do not vote in unison with their rulings. We invest our stock with companies even though we do not like some of their practices. We often belong to a political party even though we do not agree with every single aspect of that political party's platform. We often belong to other organizations even though we do not agree with everything that the organization stands for or does. We are citizens of communities, cities, and school districts even though at times we disagree with some things, it doesn't mean we abandon the entire thing. How is it sometimes that we may be harder on those we stand with or are against in the faith arena?

Again, in Jesus's prayer in John 17, he doesn't pray for unity as much as he is praying that his followers will recognize their unity "that they may be completely one so that the world may know that" God sent him. Our unity in the Gospel is given in Christ through the events of the crucifixion and empty tomb. We as faithful followers strive to recognize that unity in all that we are about. However, we know there is a human difference in our perspectives when it comes to understanding, reading, and interpreting

Scripture. We know that certain denominations of the Christian faith approach and practice things differently. However, we strive to recognize and be humble enough to know that no single human being on this earth knows the mind of God, that even though we may have disagreements, we are also united in the Gospel. All of us approach the altar today equally in need of the bread and wine, all of us stand on level ground at the foot of the cross. As we approach next Sunday, recognizing the gift of the Holy Spirit, may we continue to see the bigger picture of God at work around us. May we not simply look pass or downplay what divides us but faithfully and honestly discern and discuss those differences as Christians, as citizens, as members of the human race; while not forgetting God's role in our faith lives as well, recalling that God seeks to embrace everyone; God commands us to love everyone, God tells us to forgive our enemies; Jesus prays that we may be one and he and the Father are one. May we not let our differences seek to disqualify others away from God. May recognize what God has done for all the world in Jesus Christ. Amen.