

“ONE IN THE SPIRIT, ONE IN THE LORD”

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Galatians 3:23-29

John 17:20-26

The Gospel lesson you just heard is part of a prayer Jesus prayed to his Father just days before he was to die on the cross. A little earlier he had sat down with his disciples and explained to them that he would be going away, and that they should not despair, because he would send the Holy Spirit to dwell with them. After he finished talking to them, Jesus went off by Himself and prayed this prayer to God.

It is a beautiful prayer, where he pours out his love for his father, but also pours out his love for all of his followers, his children. Like any person leaving loved ones behind, he's worried about them. He knows what they're like, and the things with which they are struggling. He also knows that it's very likely that after he's gone, things could go bad pretty quickly – because the One in whom they found their unity would be gone, and they would start fighting amongst themselves.

Jesus knows that, most likely, they'd start jockeying for positions of authority. He knows too, that they would probably start to put together rules – who's in and who's out, who's most important – well, you get the picture. Why, even before he died, you remember, there were several times when the disciples were jockeying for position, fighting amongst themselves as to who would sit at his right hand. So naturally, he knew that after he died, it would only get worse – and it grieved him so. For he knew that their disunity would weaken the Christian witness – why would people want to follow others who fought so much with each other?

Well, I'd like to say that what Jesus feared never happened, but apparently it did, because some years later, we see Paul writing regularly about problems within the church. Most of his New Testament letters were written to the young church in the wake of problems they were having – again, arguments over who's in and who's out, who's following the rules and who's not, who has authority and who doesn't. Over and over again, Paul appeals for unity for the sake of the Kingdom of God and the cause of Christ.

And would that Paul's words would have made a difference. Oh, they did for a while, but over and over again, over the ensuing centuries, divisions have arisen among Christians – over so many things. And sadly, still, to this day, we Christians fight amongst ourselves.

We still argue over authority. We still argue over who's in and who's out. We still go back and forth about rules and regulations. We still have some pretty petty disagreements.

Don't believe me? Well, let me tell you something that happened to me one day. I was presiding at a wedding, in which the bride was a lapsed Catholic and the groom Methodist. It was a lovely wedding, and at one point during the reception I was standing near the grandmother of the bride, and heard her exclaim quite loudly to a guest, "Well, it was nice, but someday, we'll get them married in the real church" (meaning, of course, the Catholic Church). Now, let me hasten to say that something like that, for me, has been a rare occurrence – most often, I have had nothing but good experiences with Catholics. But that is just one example of how we put up walls between each other.

Or, have you ever seen churches called something like "True Gospel Christian Church" or "Full Gospel Christian Church"? The implication is that there then are churches they feel do not preach the true gospel or the full gospel.

I could go on and on. There are churches where everyone is welcomed and included, while there are others that would never let me or another woman speak in church. There are churches who celebrate contemporary worship and can't imagine anyone being moved by traditional worship, and vice versa. There are churches where if you don't have a suit and tie, or a dress on, you're looked down upon.

You get the idea. Even today, disunity runs rampant in the church, and I have no doubt, that even today, this grieves the Lord. Sometimes I can envision Jesus standing in front of all the churches and saying something like, "Will you relax? Will you stop spending so much time worrying about the wrong things, and start spending time focusing on the one thing you all have in common?"

The Bishop who ordained me, Bishop Yeakel, always used to say to us, "Keep the main thing the main thing." Which means, it's all about Jesus. Period. It's all about Jesus!

And if we would keep the main thing the main thing, the walls of division and disunity would come down. We would realize that we can co-exist very peacefully in spite of our differences and diversity – because we are One in Christ Jesus.

That's what the members of Shadyside Presbyterian Church wanted the world to remember when in 1933 they started the practice of what was then called "Worldwide Communion Sunday." They wanted the millions of Christians around the world to, for that one day at least, remember our unity in Christ, and on that day, the first Sunday of October, put aside our differences and gather around the communion table, giving thanks for God's gift of Jesus to all of us.

What they started in 1933, continued to grow into the next decade, and eventually the National Council of Churches got behind it, until it became the

tradition of churches around the world. Today, virtually all Christian churches celebrate Holy Communion on this Sunday, and in the process reaffirm our unity, one with the other. What a blessed relief it is to be one in Christ, in the midst of a world so hell-bent on fighting about everything.

What a joy it is to picture in our minds people of all ages, races, nationalities receiving the bread and wine on this one day, and remembering Jesus' love for us. When Evelyn read the Gospel lesson in German, and Pat read it in Samoan, I remembered, that despite what the media tries to tell us about the downfall of Christianity, there are indeed, Christians in every corner of this world, and as far apart as we are, physically, doctrinally, or in any other way – we are yet One in Him – and nothing can take that away.

So today, we come to the Lord's table with all of them – Catholics, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Disciples of Christ; young, old; traditional worshipers and contemporary ones; male, female; laity and clergy – we come to the table with all of these saints on earth, and we join with the saints in heaven as well. Together, we hear those life-saving words, "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you," and hearing them, we know that no matter what, all will still be well, and it will be well because of Jesus.

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. On this World Communion Sunday, we live out that truth as together, the world around, we come to the table of our Lord. Then may we go forth changed by this meal so that all who see us will know we are Christians by our love. May it be so.

Amen.