

7 Easter Yr C, 12/05/2013
Jn 17:20-26
Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson
Interim Pastor of Unity Lutheran Church,
Medicine Hat, Alberta

“So that the world may believe and know”

Prayer: O God of transfigured light: Give us pure hearts that we may see you. Humble hearts that we may hear you. Hearts of love that we may serve you. Hearts of faith that we may live with you. Amen. (Dag Hammarskjöld)

The story is told of a Lutheran pastor who was introduced to a Baptist woman who had spent forty-five years on the mission field and had then volunteered for four stints in the Peace Corps. The Lutheran pastor complimented her for her many years of wonderful service and added smilingly, “And I’ll forgive you for being a Baptist.”

“What are you?” she asked. When the pastor told her he was a Lutheran, she said, with a twinkle, “Well then, I’m really glad to meet you here, because I certainly won’t see you in heaven.”

We may smile or perhaps even laugh at such a story, but beneath it is a rather sober and sad truth: namely, that we Christians continue to be divided and our divisions fail miserably to accomplish God’s holy will and purposes.

Another story of yet another Lutheran pastor: Several years ago now, I can remember there was a black pastor who was newly ordained and received his first call to serve one of our ELCIC parishes. The congregation was mostly white with only a small minority of non-whites. I was saddened to learn that only after a short period of time, the pastor had been treated so badly by the congregation to such an extent that he had to leave. I have not heard of that pastor since then, and do not know what happened to him.

In today’s gospel Jesus, in his high-priestly prayer, prays for Christians of every time and place—including us. He prays for Christian unity—that all Christians would reflect the unity, the oneness that exists within God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Sad to say, Christians down through the

ages and even today have failed to exist in unity. Christians have been and still are divided by Eastern and Western versions of Christianity; by Roman Catholics and Protestants; and within Protestantism, there are a plethora of expressions of Christianity—everything from various kinds of conservatives, fundamentalists and evangelicals, to various kinds of liberals, progressives, post-moderns and post-denominationalists. Sadly, we Lutherans here in North America of late are becoming even more divided from one another. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Jesus continues to weep for all of us Christians divided from one another.

Speaking of Jesus weeping, I'm reminded of the following beautiful story told by William. Bausch.

A woman's happiness was shattered by the loss of her brother, a good man, dearly loved. Torn by anguish, she kept asking God, "Why?" But hearing only silence, she set out in search of an answer. She had not gone far when she came upon an old man sitting on a bench. He was weeping. He said, "I have suffered a great loss. I am a painter, and I have lost my eyesight." He, too, was seeking an answer to the question, "Why?" The woman invited him to join her and, taking him by the arm, they trudged down the road.

Soon they overtook a young man walking aimlessly. He had lost his wife, the source of his joy, to another man. He joined in the search of an answer to the "Why?" question. Shortly they came upon a young woman weeping on her front doorstep. She had lost her child. She, too, joined them. Nowhere could they find an answer.

Suddenly they came upon Jesus Christ. Each confronted him with their questions, but Jesus gave no answer. Instead, he began to cry and said, "I am bearing the burden of a woman who has lost her brother, a girl whose baby has died, a painter who has lost his eyesight, and a young man who has lost a love in which he delighted." As he spoke, the four moved closer, and they embraced each other. And they grasped Jesus' hands.

Jesus spoke again saying, “My dominion is the dominion of the heart. I cannot prevent pain. I can only heal it.” “How?” asked the woman. “By sharing it,” he said. And then he was gone. And the four?

They were left standing, holding each other.¹

I think the story is a beautiful one for a couple of reasons. Notice that the suffering and loss, the grief is what these people share in common and draws them together. For many of you here today, is that not also true of you? Whatever they may be—your sufferings, losses, and grief unites you here too with others going through similar sufferings, losses and grief. Whether it’s illnesses, loss and grief over loved ones now departed, difficult, failing or failed relationships, divisions over church-related, theological, spiritual issues, work-related issues, school-related issues, or other kinds of things; the sufferings, losses, and grief are real and they unite you with others.

However the story also reveals another truth: namely, the sufferings, losses and grief draw these people closer to Jesus and his love, his compassion. In love and compassion he comes close to them and shares their sufferings, losses and grief with them. In the end, he leaves them with his love and compassion and they are able to bear their sufferings, losses and grief by loving each other and having compassion on each other and holding each other as they move ahead in their lives.

Coming back to Jesus’ high-priestly prayer now, we are reminded of the higher and deeper purpose of Christian unity. Jesus prays that Christians may live in unity and work in unity not for the sake of a selfish holiness to keep the Church and Christians away from real life in the world. No! Rather, the higher and deeper purpose of Christian unity and oneness is to reach out to the world so that the world may believe that God the Father sent Jesus and so that the world may know that God the Father loves everyone in the world just as he loved his own Son, Jesus.

How will the world believe and know God and God’s love through Jesus and through us Christians unless they are able to see unity among us? That reminds me of yet another story attributed to the founder of the Methodist

Church, John Wesley. John Wesley tells the story of a dream he had of going to the Heavenly Gates and found them shut. In his dream Wesley called out, "Are there any Methodists in there?"

The answer came back, "No."

He called out again, "Are there any Baptists in there?"

"No," came the reply.

"Are there any members of the Church of Scotland?"

"No."

"Are there any United Reformed Church members?"

"No."

"Well, then," Wesley asked, "who is in there?"

Everyone then answered Wesley with these resounding words: "We are all Christians!"

If only the world today could hear those same words from all Christians of every denomination! All the more reason for Christians to be in the world and befriending non-Christians. Non-Christians do not need our judgement or holier-than-thou attitude. They need our friendship, our humble presence, a listening ear, a compassionate heart, a kind word, a practical deed. If we, together, in unity, by God's grace, can love the world and everyone in it with the love of Jesus, then the world I'm sure will be well on its way to believing and knowing God and God's love.

1 Wm. J. Bausch, *A World Of Stories for Preachers and Teachers and all who love stories that move and challenge* (New London, CT & Dublin: Twenty-Third Publications & The Columba Press, 1998 & 2007, Eighth Printing), pp. 274-275.