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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Easter 7

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, the prayer that Jesus prayed in our gospel reading this morning...

The prayer we have just heard in John 17...

This prayer is a prayer for what? For unity.

Jesus prays that his disciples may be one.

Unity or oneness is indeed of great importance to God.

That is why, I think, the Gospel writer John has Jesus speak these words in a prayer.

By Jesus' words here appearing in a prayer, it lends extra significance to the words.

The use of a "prayer" here suggests that these words of Jesus, that his desire for oneness, was foremost on his heart, such that Jesus would lift these words for unity up to God for God's blessing.

Now, I said "Gospel writer John has Jesus speak these words in a prayer..." as if to suggest that Jesus didn't ACTUALLY pray these words, but only that John created this story.

The truth of the matter is that we don't know if Jesus spoke these words in a prayer OR if what we find in our Gospel reading is a literary device by the Gospel writer John to lend importance to Jesus' words, as I said.

After all how would John know what Jesus prayed, if Jesus was saying the prayer silently to himself?

The text of the Gospel simply says, "Jesus looked up to heaven and said..."

But it is possible Jesus was speaking this prayer OUT LOUD, which then would allow for the Gospel writer John to overhear Jesus' words in his prayer.

But regardless of whether Jesus actually spoke these words out loud in a prayer, or the Gospel writer John composed this prayer himself and then attached it to Jesus...

Regardless of what is the truth, the point being is that unity was still seen as extremely important to Jesus and so then to the church.

Oneness was highly important to the Christian faith then, as well as now.

Why? Because unity and oneness gives witness.

In this prayer, Jesus prays to God saying, "May your people be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and that you love them."

Unity among God's people is meant to be a witness to the world.

Indeed, when the world sees a Christian congregation, or a Christian denomination at odds with itself...

When the world observes strife and division among God's people, the Church gives a poor witness.

And the people of the world then no doubt say to themselves, "I don't want any part of that."

But on the other hand, unity and oneness conveys a powerful message of solidarity, of harmony, of agreement, of focus.

But unity does not mean homogeneity.

Oneness does not mean that God's people are all the same.

If God had intended for unity to mean homogeneity then all people would have the same skin tone, the same height, and the same build.

If God had intended for oneness to mean homogeneity then all people would share the same language, the same ethnicity, and the same background.

If God had intended for all people to be uniform, then all people would have similar interests, similar abilities, and similar beliefs.

But God did not create human beings in that way. God did not cut every person from the same cloth, so to speak. No, there is great diversity among people.

Unity does not mean homogeneity, and thank God that is the case.

Because there is a richness in the human family.

There is a fullness, an abundance in the human species that derives from our diversity. Again, praise be to God.

To be sure, even God's self exists in diversity.

We speak of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We speak of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

We speak of God as three different persons.

Within God's self, God is not homogenous. Within God's self, God is not all the same. That is strange to say it that way.

But that would explain perhaps why God likes diversity, and creates human beings as a diverse people, because God's self exists in diversity.

I would even dare say that God is okay when it comes to diversity faith.

In the world there are Catholics and Orthodox Christians...

There are Lutherans and Anglicans... ...Quakers and Presbyterians... ...Baptists and Methodists... ...Pentecostals and Unitarians...

There are also Muslims and Jews... ...Buddhists and Hindus...
...so on and so forth.

There are also atheists and agnostics.

The truth of the matter is, everyone believes in something, even if that something is no god at all.

Everyone believes in something, even if that something is a philosophy or an ideology.

Some people describe themselves as existentialists or nihilists...
...rationalists or pragmatists... ...materialists or idealists... ...capitalists or communists... ...fascists or nationalists.

But again, the truth is that everyone puts their faith and trust in something, even if that something is power or money, fame or fortune.

We all worship some –ism.

PAUSE

Martin Luther once said that we all worship some thing, we all subscribe to some is –ism.

And it is such that when the chips are down, when we are at our rope’s end, when we are in our most dire of circumstances, that to which we turn is our god, so says Martin Luther.

When we are in despair, when we have seemingly lost all hope, that to which we turn is our god.

I guess that is another way to describe our bucket list. What we hope to do before we die.

And people put all sorts of things on their bucket list...

Travel the world. Learn a language. Read *Moby Dick*. Try a certain type of food. Et cetera.

But how many of us, include, “Grow in my relationship with God”?

What or whom do we turn to in our deepest need? When faced with our own mortality, where we put our trust, that is our god.

PAUSE

But, returning to what we were taking about a moment ago, why is there such diversity of faith in the world?

Why did God create all these various faith systems, or are all these faith systems somehow the result of the brokenness of sin?

No, I don’t necessarily think various faiths are a result of sin.

In my humble opinion, even the diversity of faith is a gift of God.

In my humble opinion, part of reason for the diversity of faith is so that we can grow to more deeply appreciate the whole human family.

For I believe one of the most important aspects we are to learn about other people is what they believe in, and why they believe what they believe, and how they are arrived at that belief.

I believe this because this is the deepest aspect of each of us as individuals.

This is the aspect to which we would turn when face with the most dire of circumstances.

And it is this aspect then that reveals most about who we are as individuals.

This is the aspect then that helps us most appreciate another individual for who they are deep down.

Of course, this is probably not the opening question we should ask someone when we first meet someone.

“Hi, my name is Joel. So, if you were faced with the most difficult situation in your life, what if you were even faced with your own mortality, to what or whom would you turn?”

To which the other person would probably respond, “Excuse me, but I have to go. I am due back on earth in a couple of minutes.”

No, I wouldn't lead into a conversation with the question about one's personal –ism.

But I do believe that as we get to know people more intimately as friends, as colleagues, as neighbors, it is worth a conversation about that in which we put our ultimate trust and hope.

And, in truth, as we get to know each other's –ism, without necessarily feeling like we have to judge that other person, or convert that other person to our –ism...

As we get to know each other's –ism, we journey closer together to the heart of who we are as a human family, and as a human species created by God.

Think of it like a bicycle wheel, where we all start out on the rim of the tire, and as we journey in life along the spokes, we get closer to each, when we draw closer to the center, to the hub of the tire.

If we can talk about what is most central, most important to us, that which we stake our lives on...

When we draw closer to the center hub, we find ourselves then drawing closer to each other along the spokes.

And when we get to the center of the wheel, then, and only then, do we find the full sense of the whole of humanity.

And this is why then I believe God even intended for there to be diversity in faith.

Because by getting to know one another's deepest values and beliefs, we get to know each other better and humanity as a whole.

It would be awfully boring, otherwise. It would be awfully boring, if we were all the same.

How could we grow and learn from one another then?

So diversity of faith, as I see it, is a gift of God, not a result of sin.

In fact, a theologian by the name of Rob Bell expressed it this way.

"When Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life,' what Jesus may have meant is NOT that Jesus is the ONLY way that leads to salvation."

No, Rob Bell sees this statement from Jesus NOT as exclusive, narrow, or limited, such that there is only one way, one faith system.

No, Rob Bell says that this statement of Jesus is actually as wide and as expansive a claim a person can make.

What Jesus may in fact be saying is that regardless of whether a person is a Christian or not, if that person is working toward the redemption of the world...

...if that person is embodying love in the world...

...if that person is showing mercy and kindness...

...if that person is generous and caring...

...if that person is grace-filled and gracious...

...if that person is forgiving and repentant...

...if that person is humble and meek...

...if that person is a force of healing and reconciliation in the world...

...well then Jesus is working in that person.

That is how Rob Bell interprets that verse from John 14:6.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one come to the Father except through me.”

So, there can be all kinds of diversity with respect to belief systems, but Jesus is working in all those belief systems, he is working through whoever you are, whatever you believe, if your life is one that seeks to bring about redemption, healing, and reconciliation.

And, that is what I am getting at, when I say that diversity of faith can even be a gift of God, if that diversity leads to conversations and growth of understanding in the human family, such that we learn from each other how we are going about seeking to bring about redemption, healing, and reconciliation.

Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life, but Jesus can be working in all sorts of faith systems.

Nobody comes to the Father except through me.

However people come to know the Divine, Rob Bell says, it is still through the grace of Jesus even if those people don't call their faith system Christianity.

And it is diversity of coming to know the divine, it is these various faith systems that can and often lead to a new profound sense of unity and oneness, if we are willing to engage with one another in deep relationship.

And it is this prayer for unity, this prayer for oneness, that ultimately I believe Jesus is praying for. Unity and oneness does not, and indeed should not, have to be about homogeneity, but unity and oneness should ultimately be about growing together as one human family.

Thanks be to God. Amen.