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Easter 7

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and 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, this past Thursday was the day the remembered the Ascension of our Lord.

And Ascension Day is a day on the church calendar that is often overlooked, mostly because it falls on a Thursday, not a Sunday.

But the Ascension is important in the life of the church, if for no other reason than because the Ascension of Jesus clears up what otherwise would be a rather dicey situation for the church.

For we know, that Jesus is not still walking the earth in our modern day, right?

And yet, the church, of course, speaks of Jesus as having been raised from the dead.

And so where is the resurrected Lord?

Obviously the church does not speak of Jesus as having died again after his resurrection, otherwise that would have undone all that we celebrated at Easter.

And so, where did Jesus go?

And so, yes, the church speaks then of Jesus as having ascended back into heaven.

And I share this explanation with you, not to say we should doubt the Ascension of our Lord.

But I do want us to understand why the Ascension is necessary in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It was necessary for the life of the church for believers to understand why Jesus was not still walking the earth even though he had been resurrected.

Yes, the church celebrates then the Ascension of the Lord on the 40th day after Easter, which was this past Thursday.

And the words of Jesus in our Gospel reading today speak of Jesus' return to God the Father.

Jesus prays these words to God the Father, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed."

Here Jesus is speaking of himself as having been with God the Father at the dawn of Creation, and he is beseeching God the Father so as to return to the Father in heaven.

And, Jesus goes on to ask God the Father to protect all believers in his name, so that they may be one.

Jesus asks the heavenly Father that Christian believers may be protected in his name, so that they may be one.

And so here we have Jesus's sort of "Last Will and Testament," if you will.

Here we have that which is most important for Jesus.

It is the last request we hear from Jesus, before he ascended back to the Father.

Here Jesus beseeches God that God's people may be one.

Above all else, Jesus desires unity for his disciples.

Quite an important legacy, is it not?

PAUSE

Now, in our own lives, we may or may not have given some thought about own legacy.

We may have thought about what we hope to leave behind.

We may have thought about how our life has impacted others.

Some individuals contribute to particular organizations.

Some individuals are passionate about a certain cause, like the environment, or hunger, or education.

And so, some individuals start an endowment or a fund to provide money to a given cause.

Some serve faithfully in an organization for many years and their legacy is service to that given cause.

Some inspire others by their words, by their teaching, and that becomes their legacy.

Some give of themselves to fight some injustice, whether it be racial injustice, economic injustice, gender inequality, you name it, and that becomes their legacy.

Yes, in our own lives we may have given a lot of thought about what our legacy will be.

PAUSE

And then you have our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, through whom a movement called Christianity was formed.

Here you have our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who formed this movement to proclaim the love of God for all people.

Here you have this movement and Jesus asks God the Father that within this movement, may they be one, may they be unified.

Ironic, isn't it?

Ironic that Jesus prayed for Christian unity, when we think of all the various denominations that out there.

Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, Lutherans, so on, and so on, and so on.

Even within our own denomination, we have ELCA Lutherans, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, NALC Lutherans, Missouri Synod Lutherans.

And looking at all this disunity, we would wonder if we have failed something awful in fulfilling Jesus' request that we would all be one?

Or, has God the Father somehow failed in responding to Jesus' prayer request, such that God the Father has not answered his Son's prayer?

And, we have to wonder, did Martin Luther when he caused a rift in the medieval Roman church in the 16th century, had any regrets, whether he had questioned if

he was doing the right thing by starting the Reformation because of the division that followed?

But Luther being Luther, probably not. He probably was fine with his actions.

PAUSE

Now, personally, I don't believe God the Father failed to answer Jesus' request that God's people would be one.

And I don't think we Christians have somehow failed Jesus when the church formed numerous denominations and church bodies.

And, I don't think Luther himself was wrong in starting the Reformation.

I say this, because there is something to be said for diversity in unity.

There is something to be said for having distinctions between Christians.

For even God in God's self, even the Godhead is diversity in unity.

God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—diversity.

And yet God is one God—unity.

This is what we will celebrate on Holy Trinity Sunday in only a few weeks' time.

Holy Trinity Sunday is about diversity in unity. Holy Trinity Sunday is about God who is three in one, one in three.

So, I don't think the church as it exists in all its varied expressions is necessarily a bad thing, that it somehow goes against Jesus' final request, that somehow Jesus' legacy has been tarnished.

No, not at all.

Different strokes for different folks as the saying goes.

PAUSE

But, there is a unifying factor among the various church bodies.

And here is where the rubber meets the road.

Here is where the power of Jesus' legacy either sinks or swims.

There is a shared commonality, or at least there should be a shared commonality among churches, which is the capacity to share the love of God.

And at the end of John 17, Jesus prays as well to God the Father these words: "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I 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."

Love then is this unifying force, this shared commonality.

And so, diversity in unity is great, provided the various diverse expressions of "church" are motivated by love.

After all, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are just three separate ways in which the Triune God shows God's love for God's people, and so, yes, the Godhead itself is unified by means of love.

And the various expressions of church are unified if in their various expressions they are motivated by love.

PAUSE

And, where do we go to understand that empowering, unifying force of love? We go to 1 Corinthians 13, which is usually a wedding text.

But in actuality, Paul was talking about the church community in 1 Corinthians 13, because unfortunately, the church in Corinth had its share of problems and conflict.

And so in a letter to the church in Corinth, Paul explains the preeminence of love for the well-being of community, for the unity of a group.

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

"And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."

"If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

What Paul is getting at here is this.

That if we say or do anything, anything in this world...if we say or do anything by which our words and deeds are not motivated by love...then it is not worth doing.

If we say or do anything without love being the impetus, then what we say or do means nothing.

Everything is to be motivated by love.

Brushing your teeth after eating. Getting dressed in the morning. We do this because there is a sense of love for our own person, such that we don't want our teeth to get cavities nor do we want our naked bodies to be exposed to the elements.

And disposing litter in the trash as opposed to throwing it on the ground, and refraining from using plastic straws, these are acts of love toward the environment.

Learning about candidates, and voting in an election—these are actions of love for it shows we want what is best in our elected leaders and the communities they serve.

Holding a door open for someone, saying “God bless you” when someone sneezes—these are simply acts of caring and love, that recognize the humanity of another person.

Coming to church, singing God's praise, praying for others in need, hearing the Word to know God's will—these are ways in which we learn to love God and others.

Everything, yes EVERYTHING we say and do is to be done out of love.

Indeed, if what we say and do does not fall under the umbrella of love, well, then the apostle Paul would question whether we should be saying or doing it.

Speaking and acting in love is, I would dare say, the paramount stewardship issue of all.

Love is stewardship par excellence, because it explains how all that we do and all that we speak can be done in a faithful manner, according to God's will.

Stewardship is being faithful to God's will in the world, and acting and speaking in love accomplishes that.

Love is the fulfilling of Jesus' legacy. Love is Jesus' legacy, as exemplified on the cross.

And, love then is the glue for that unity of which Jesus holds most sacred for the people of God.

PAUSE

Jesus says, "Holy Father, protect them in your NAME that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

The Father's NAME is love, not literally, but this is who and what Father is about, it is what God is about, and so it is what we are to be about.

And our Christian life is about being that extension of God in the world that embodiment of the legacy of love for the world.

Yes, when all is said done, that is it.

We, ourselves, are Jesus' legacy in the world, if we ourselves embody the love of God.

We are Jesus' legacy, if we are united in love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.