**John 17:20-23** May 8, 2016

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*John 17:20 [Jesus prayed,] “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. 22I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

***E PLURIBUS UNUM***

At first, that sermon theme looks like the cat must have walked across my computer keyboard. Except we don’t have a cat. Maybe a split second after you looked at that theme, it started to look familiar. “*E pluribus unum*.” *E pluribus unum* is on every single coin in your pocket or purse – unless you carry coins from before 1873. And *E pluribus unum* is on the most used piece of currency, the $1 bill. So this sermon titled *E pluribus unum*—is it the pastor’s sermon about money? No. *E pluribus unum*. What does it mean? What does it have to do with the Christian faith?

*E pluribus unum* is a Latin phrase meaning, “From many, one.”

In 1776, the British colonists in America began to use this phrase as a watchword, a motto, for the American Revolution. In 1776, there were, as you know, 13 British colonies on the Atlantic coast. All of them were answerable directly to Britain. There was no central or federal government for the thirteen colonies. Each colony was individually answerable to London. The colonies were started by different groups of people. Some came to make a buck. Some came for religious freedom. Lots of reasons. Lots of colonies. But on the brink of the Revolutionary War the colonists declared, *“E pluribus unum*.” The colonists said, “Britain, you will not be able to divide and conquer us. You will not be able to pick off the colonies one by one. While some colonies fight you, you won’t get some of us to ally with you. We will stand united.” *E pluribus unum*; from many, one. They would stand united.

**I. Jesus’ Great Desire for Us**

John 17 is Jesus’ most special prayer. These are the last words of Jesus at his last meal with his disciples. Jesus knew he would be leaving them. And Jesus decided that his last words to his disciples in a group setting would be prayer.

To my knowledge, it is Jesus’ only prayer recorded at any length (though I might be mistaken on that). Oh yes, we hear other prayers of Jesus: prayers in Gethsemane, or at Lazarus’ tomb. But those are short. Just a sentence or two. Here the entire chapter is a prayer. Jesus first prays for himself, then for the eleven disciples left with him, and then the very last words of his prayer are for another group. He prays, ***“My prayer is not for them [the apostles] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.”*** (20). Jesus’ prayer looks forward. The Son of God looked into the future and saw his Apostles going out into the world. He saw the Christian faith spread around the Roman Empire in the next couple hundred years. He saw it spreading down into the African continent through Egypt and Ethiopia. He saw the Gospel spread to India and later into northern Europe, and then to cover the New World. In his vision of the future, Jesus saw the Gospel spread around the world. His prayer was for all those people.

But Jesus’ prayer was not for “them”, other believers, his prayer was for you. Even as Jesus prayed in that upper room, as he prayed ***“for those who will believe”*** Jesus was praying for you, and you, and you. He was praying for this congregation. Jesus, the all-knowing Son of God was praying for Faith Lutheran Church of Radcliff, Kentucky. He prayed for us gathered here this morning. In Jesus’ last prayer, what did he pray for?

There is a “what if” question every single one of us has asked ourselves. What if you found Aladdin’s lamp? When you rubbed that lamp and the genie offered you those three wishes, what would you wish for? At some point in our lives, maybe only when we were kids and our imaginations were still vivid and lively, at some point in our lives we have thought about that question. If you could have anything in the world, what would it be?

In John 17, Jesus prays for us. He could pray for anything, anything in earth or heaven. What do you think Jesus prayed for? Did he pray for our healing? Did he pray that our troubles be small? Did he pray for us to be wealthy and healthy? What was Jesus’ highest hope for you, for me? Did you hear his prayer? ***“I pray… that all of them may be one.”*** That’s it? Jesus could ask for anything in the world for us, and he asks for… he asks for us to not argue?

Of all the things he could have prayed for, why this? Why did he choose unity?

There are many reasons, more than I can think of or have time for. And I am sure that sharp Christians like you can think of more than this. But let us start with these reasons. One reason Jesus prayed for unity is that he knew how sinful we are. At times we need other people to call us to account. Or even if we don’t need to be called on the carpet for our sins, we at least need to have the sense that we are accountable. Kind of like when I let our dog out back. If she thinks I am watching her, she is much less likely to go where she is not supposed to go. But as soon as she thinks that my eyes are off her, she is off. We are all like that, at least at times. The accountability of belonging to a group is a healthy thing. But it only works when the group is unified. It’s one reason we need unity.

A second reason we need unity is that the Christian life is not for ourselves, but for others. Even though we would be very content to live for ourselves, to get the food, the house, the job, the clothes, the everything that we want for ourselves, that is not what God has called us to. Unless we are in a community of believers, we selfishly live for ourselves and no one else.

Another reason to be blessed with unity is that we sometimes need help. As long as things are going along well, we are pretty content to go it alone. But as soon as problems arise, we learn the value of being part of a larger group. In the hospital? How re-assuring to have fellow Christians visit and pray for you. In a difficult relationship? Let fellow believers hold your hand, give you selfless advice, and strength from God’s Word. Unity is a blessing in adversity.

And we could find other reasons that we need the unity that Christ prayed for. In short, God created us to be members of a community.

**II. Dealing with a Lack of Jesus’ Greatest Desire**

That is why Jesus’ great desire for us is that we are unified. This means that whenever we sense divisions among us as a group of believers, the alarm bells should go off. It’s like nerves that tell you the water is too hot, or that the raspberry thorns are sharp. When we start to feel or hear about divisions in the congregation, something in us should say, “There’s a problem here.” We can’t slough it off. We can’t just say, “That’s the way things are.” Divisions are contrary to the great blessing Jesus prayed for us in John 17. Those things need to be resolved.

Wherever there is division, there is sin. Oh sure, there are differences of opinion. Godly differences of opinion are a good thing. They come from different perspectives. But we are not talking about opinions here. We are talking about divisions when the paths part.

If we look back to the Bible, the early Christian church with the most problems was the church at Corinth. Hands down, the Corinthian congregation won the dysfunctional church award. The Bible book of 1 Corinthians deals with more problems in a congregation, more false teachings, than any of the other. Do you know the first problem Paul identified? Open your Bible to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and start reading the section headings. After his greeting, the first section heading is “Divisions in the Church.” All of the many problems—and they had many—all of them stemmed from their internal divisions.

Well, what can we do to promote unity, to end divisions, in our midst?

Let’s go back to Jesus’ prayer. ***“I have given them the glory that you [Father] gave me, that they may be one”*** (22). Listen to that again. Think about this question: What does Jesus give to believers to promote their unity? ***“I have given them the glory that you [Father] gave me, that they may be one.”*** Jesus takes his glory and gives it to Christians. He says that will unify them. What is this glory Jesus gives us?

Is it the ability to wow people with miracles? Is it great wealth? Is it great power? Martin Luther once said it something like this (paraphrase), “Christ could have been an earthly king if it would have done any good for gaining heaven. But as far as gaining heaven, earthly power and fame was worthless.”[[1]](#footnote-1)  Just think about that the next time a TV preacher tells you that Jesus wants you to have financial gain, great wealth and personal happiness.

Then what *was* Jesus’ glory? The glory of Christ was his humility, his willingness to serve. Not just a willingness to serve when asked, but he even searched out those who needed his service. He came to this earth, an earth full of people who are far more concerned about themselves than other people, and he gave up his life for them. And he knew that many of them would reject his free gift of forgiveness. And even though he knew they would throw that gift back at him, that gift that cost him his life, he still willingly made the sacrifice for them.

And when he looked ahead at people like us for whom he had died, and who knew him, and yet day by day fell to bickering, to being short-tempered, to insisting on our own way, he was not just content to suffer and die for our sins, not content with that, in John 17 as he watches the seconds on the count-down clock of his life melt away, he sits down and he prays for us.

Dear Jesus, we are so unworthy. Forgive us. And that glory you have, help me to somehow have and show some little bit of it!

So here is the question: What can we as saved Christians do to promote unity? Base your life on the life of Jesus who has loved you. Be concerned about others. Don’t just admit you were wrong, apologize. Accept other people’s apologies, even if they sin against you seven times, or even seventy-seven times. Forgive from the heart, and not grudgingly with a “Well, just don’t let it happen again.” Even allow yourself to be wronged.

May the glory of Jesus our Savior, may the things about him that make us love him, may those be the things that show through our lives. Then we will become the Christian *e pluribus unum.*

Oh, one last thing. This evening with Jesus’ last great prayer. Do you remember how it began? It began in John 13 with Jesus, their teacher, the Son of God, the Messiah, doing slave work. He began the night by washing their stinky, sweaty, dusty feet. And here it ends with him praying for them, and for us. Yes, when we reflect the glory of Christ, it will be true of us, *e pluribus unum*. Amen.

1. *Luther’s Works,* Vol. XL, “The Keys”,356. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)