

Unity

John 17:20-26

The Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2015

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Jesus gave His words to the original disciples. He taught them the words of God. Jesus also showed the original disciples the miraculous signs that He performed. He changed water into wine. He healed the sick. He fed five thousand men plus women and children with five loaves and two fish. He walked on water. He restored the lame. He gave sight to the blind. He raised the dead. These signs serve to confirm the words of Jesus. For this reason the original disciples put their faith in Him. Their faith in Him was sealed when He Himself rose from the dead.

Once our Lord ascends into heaven, you have a bunch of disciples who have seen what He did and heard what He said. They have the words of Jesus. They then go out into the world and teach others what Jesus said. Just like Jesus the original disciples performed miraculous signs to confirm that their words did in fact come from Jesus and therefore from God. The original disciples restored the lame, healed the sick, and raised the dead. These signs confirmed that their words came from Jesus who came from God. As a result of the words of the original disciples many people came to believe in Jesus.

You and I came to believe in Jesus in this way. We have the apostolic word. In other words we have the words of the apostles who have the words of Jesus. Therefore we have the words of Jesus. Because we have the words of Jesus we have believed in Jesus. We are among those for whom Jesus prayed on the night before He died. He prayed for those who would believe in Him through the original disciple's words. We have done so and therefore Jesus was praying specifically for us.

The reason that Jesus prays for us is that we may all be one. Jesus wants us to be one just as He is one with the Father. The Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father. Jesus prays that the ones who believe in Him may be in the Father and in Son. And so you are in the Father and in the Son. You have the words of Jesus. If anyone has the words of Jesus, they are in Jesus and Jesus is in them. Since Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus that means that when you have the words of Jesus you are in the Father and the Son and the Father and the Son are in you. The people who are in the Father and in the Son are perfectly united with each other. They are all one. Therefore if a group of people on earth have the words of Jesus they are all one. The word binds them together in a true unity with the Father and the Son and with each other.

That means that when it comes to church unity this is where true unity is to be found. There is a temptation in the contemporary church to define unity as the union of polities. In other words the denominational structures that we have created for ourselves serve to distract us from the unity about which our Lord is speaking.

When I say denominational structures in the Missouri Synod I am talking about everything from the local church council which congregations establish all the way up to the Synodical President and all of the District Presidents. From God's perspective all of those things are denominational structures. In Methodism, Episcopalianism, and Roman Catholicism they use a system of bishops. In congregationalism they use mainly local congregational councils and maybe a pastor who is a superintendent. Different denominational structures have existed in the church throughout history. Lutheranism has not always used the system that she uses in the United States and there are church bodies with whom the Missouri Synod shares fellowship who have very different denominational structures from what we possess.

Before I say another word I would like to say that such structures are necessary for our ecclesiastical life together. If congregations of a similar confession of faith are going to relate to one another it is a necessity that they have some kind of mutual understanding by which they relate to each other. Denominational structures serve that purpose. Also local structures are necessary in order to fulfill some of the commandments of Christ like paying your pastor, serving the needs of saints elsewhere in the world, and making sure that you avoid the false prophets. Congregations need some kind of organized way of doing those things. Therefore denominational structures are not bad things in and of themselves. They simply do not bear the unity about which our Lord is speaking in John 17.

Let us therefore not be distracted by a unity that is founded upon denominational structures. While unity between the denominations is certainly desirable the fact that we do not have unity among the denominations as of now does not destroy the unity about which our Lord is praying in John 17. He is praying that the Father may make all those who believe in Him through the word of the original disciples one. That is to say He is praying that the Father may unify all those who believe in Jesus because the word of the apostles.

The Father answers this prayer. The Father will not deny the prayer of the Son. The Father unifies all those who believe in Jesus because of the word of the apostles. Therefore unity in the Church is found in the word of the apostles. Ultimately everyone who believes in Jesus is relying on Jesus for their salvation. If they are relying on Jesus for their salvation, they are obviously not relying on some good works or works that they have done. They are not relying on some kind of commitment or decision that they have made. If they are relying on Jesus for their salvation, they are not relying on their own free will. They are relying on His will. That is why earlier on the same night when Jesus prayed the prayer of John 17 He said, "You did not choose Me. I chose you." If they are relying on any of these other things, then they are not relying on Jesus and do not truly believe in Him no matter what they may say.

Such people who rely on Jesus in this way do so because of the word of the apostles. No one just ups and believes in Jesus. Therefore the Father unifies the people who believe in Jesus on the basis of the words of the apostles.

If denominations therefore are going to seek unity among themselves, the only way to do it is to do it by the words of the apostles. There is no word other than their word which brings faith in Jesus and therefore unity.

And the good news is that in spite of the disunity that we can see with the eyes of our flesh in the denominations, the Church of Jesus Christ is still unified around the word of the apostles. Only faith can see this unity, but that does not mean that the unity is not real. It is real unity forged by the Father's answer to the prayer of the Son.

Therefore everyone who hears the words of the apostles and believes in the Son is in the Father and the Son and the Father and the Son are in them. They are therefore perfectly unified in the Father and the Son.

The purpose of this unity is that the world may know that Father sent the Son.

This is where denomination unity becomes important. It is not something to be dismissed as impossible although I suppose there will always be visible divisions among us until the Lord returns. Nevertheless the world has no faith. It has not the capacity to look at the church with the eyes of faith. The world therefore cannot perceive that the Church is unified. Therefore denominational unity is a useful venture because that is something that the world can perceive.

But based upon what I have just said we do not have to wait on denominational unity in order to manifest the unity that the Father and the Son have given to us in the worlds of the apostles. Such unity

may be manifested now. The only way to manifest it is to speak the words of the apostles. When believers in Jesus speak the words of the apostles they bear witness to their own unity. The reason is that they are speaking the same words. The problem with the Church disunity is that some people are not speaking the words of the apostles and that creates disunity even among the denominations and within them. But in spite of such false speakers the unity of the Church persists on the basis of the words of the apostles. When the world perceives that unity that is when the world believes in Jesus. When they can spot that no matter what these people cling to the words of the apostles, when the world perceives that it believes in Jesus.

This is the Church's glory. It is a glory that no external divisions of denominations can take away. The external divisions of denominations cannot take away the glory of those who believe in Jesus because of the words of the apostles. External denominations also cannot control where these people will be.

I must admit that my human reason would much prefer that my denomination be filled with believers in Jesus and all other denominations be filled with unbelievers. That would certainly make my job a lot easier. But the glory of Jesus cannot be contained in this fashion. The glory of the Father and the Son cannot be put into a denominational box. It cannot be cramped into a church polity. It is not the property of church councils, superintendents, district presidents, or bishops. The apostolic word goes where it goes and converts whom it converts and does so irrespective of the structures that we have created for ourselves. Such structures as I have observed are good, but they cannot be used to determine where the glory of Christ will be. The glory of Christ will be where the glory of Christ is and the glory of Christ will be found in the word of the apostles. After all it is the word of the apostles that tell us of His miracles and of His crucifixion and of His resurrection. This is the glory of the Son. When the word the apostles is in you the glory of the Son is in you and when the glory of the Son is in you, the Son is in you and since the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father when the Son is in you the Father is in you and you are in the Father.

In this unity the Father has perfected you. And in such unity you bear witness to the world that the Father indeed sent forth the Son.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.