

7th Sun of Easter (8May16)
John17:20-26

I may be warped by competitive spirit of playing the card game Uno too much, but I'm apt to hear this reading as a challenge more than a blessing, which generally isn't the best way to hear from Jesus.

On this 7th Sunday of the season of Easter, the last before Pentecost, the assigned Gospel reading is always from John 17, a chapter that is entirely Jesus praying. And the summary of his prayer, is Uno—one—unification—that we may be one as Jesus and his Father (as he prays) are one. (Today is among great times to pray "Mother" instead, though for different reasons.)

Anyway, as I said, I wind up tempted to hear that "oneness" as a challenge. Ostensibly about teamwork, this feels like competition, that it involves ranking and comparisons, with a starting place in trying to highlight marks of unity. That's an easy temptation, since there are plenty of positives to highlight: for example, a week ago I was at our South-Central Synod of Wis. annual assembly, a great gathering of the 145 local ELCA congregations, to focus together on God's mission and our work in the world. It was also a chance to feel part of the larger whole of our 3.7 million member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. That could be a good mark of unity. Or, I suppose, it might conversely be identified as circling the wagons and hanging out with those of like mind. The basic fact that we've got a denomination could be an indicator of past divisions and schisms and ruptures.

Another apparent approach in highlighting positive examples of union would be right here as Madison Christian Community. We could claim we've got it figured out better than most. As you who have been through The Road Ahead process or any amount of history in this MCC know, we aren't joined together with Community of Hope United Church of Christ because we're the same or find it so darned easy to get along. No, we know there are differences and ongoing disagreements, maybe even about fairly fundamental distinctions, and yet we continue striving ahead. More, we continue celebrating ahead. As we share worship services the next two weeks, you may find some things aren't the way that you're used to doing it, but still find it important that we are sharing, that we're joined, are continuing to come together to practice community. That could be a good mark to highlight.

For broader ecumenism, I would name the Wis. Council of Churches, with 18 member denominations all striving for a common ministry focused on church unity, peacemaking, and justice. Wider still, we might think of interfaith groups seeking religious harmony around intersections of Christianity.

Or, aside from official functions, there are the sorts of relationships in my family that maybe you're also used to navigating—my Roman Catholic in-laws, my Episcopal father, my United Methodist grandma, my somewhat Buddhist New Age-y uncle, besides the agnostics and those who just don't get around to much religion. So do we consider a positive mark of unity if we don't have fistfights at family gatherings, or because we manage to live in a generally diverse society?

We have to ask that to understand what Jesus means or wants in us "being one." Is his vision just that we don't have too tough of a time not killing each other? Do we pat ourselves on the back because we're not breathing threats and fear and hatred against others? Jesus must desire more than that we're merely nice in church parking lots, or

stop splitting churches apart over ethical conundrums, or are able to show up for community prayer vigils after a disaster. So is he seeking complete unanimity?

In that, we can't help but notice the contrasts to our list of positives, the negative ways our efforts don't go well. With so much brokenness and fracture, we'd have to feel we don't quite measure up. So the ELCA has the most so-called "full communion" agreements between denominations. Yet we also witness that sharing communion is still divisive and complicated and hard to agree on. The other groups of Lutherans—who apparently should be our closest neighbors—are the ones with whom we have the hardest time. Or with Catholics, for all the decades of conversation and deliberation, maybe all the way back to the Reformation, still we can't share enough officially to be able to come to the communion table together. In fact, just what happens with this bread and wine and how it can function and who is allowed have been among the fiercest and deepest of arguments between Christians throughout history. It's a sad reality that this meal, this that we describe as communion—the very thing to bring us into union and make us one and unite us with the body of Christ—we can't share this and so Jesus isn't allowed to do his work. His efforts are somehow precluded or disabled.

At other tables, in contrast to Emily Tveite's words about communal meals at the Lutheran Campus Center, I would say a frustrating example is at the Jesus Lunches. An event that is supposed to be about Jesus—and so should perhaps inherently have been about bringing people together—instead has served as a fierce mark of division, telling some students they don't belong. As Sonja and I went to the gathering, I envisioned myself as part of Christianity that was about healing our separations and brokenness, bearing witness to how we should better be attending to each other. But my healing was thwarted, partially since I was standing on the same side of a barrier with the Freedom From Religion Foundation group offering pizza for an alternative "free thinkers' lunch" and with signs that said "Any way you slice it, religion is divisive." A lot of our hypocritical organized religious groups may have been accurately pegged by those signs, but not Jesus. Jesus was about crossing barriers and boundaries and being with those who had been excluded and harassed and offended. I find it tough to imagine Jesus actually wanting to be part of the lunch named after him, given the consequences for student wellbeing. In his words we hear today, Jesus acknowledges that his reputation and God's is on the line in how the world perceives us.

With that notion of what he might reject or rebel against, we realize Jesus wasn't and isn't a bystander whining, "can't we all just get along?!" Though we ought to be cautious on which side we place Jesus, we have to see there are vital dividing lines. In standing with the marginalized, Jesus stands against empire, against power, against economic bullies, even against religious institutions. In praying to his Father, Jesus prays and protests against patriarchy. So, still seeking to understand what kind of unity he's fostering, it could be that he invites you to join his way, of what he stands for and against. But that still would leave plenty of challenge in this passage, where if you're not with him, you're against him and you'd better shape up. I suspect we're not exactly eager to adopt a "his way or the highway" attitude about needing to agree with Jesus. It may leave us still further from realizing what kind of unity Jesus wants.

Our sisters and brothers in the Moravian denomination use the motto "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things," charity. But even there, we could well be left arguing (even if arguing oh-so-charitably) on whether something is essential or not!

Furthermore, having tried to list positives of joint agreement versus negatives of disintegration and dispute, that can't be the end goal. It isn't about tallying our points and credits. It can't be that Jesus just wants us to play nice with each other and not pick too many inessential fights with our siblings in the back seat of the car as he and the heavenly Father continue driving down life's highway.

By our official statements that have shaped Lutheran practice for just shy of half a millennium, we have said it isn't any visible agreement that really matters. It's not in looking or acting alike. It's not about wearing matching worship vestments or using identical language or liking the same music or even really liking each other. What makes church, what unites us across divisions (we've said for 500 years) is that the gospel is preached, is that we hear Jesus as good news. We have that foundation of receiving Jesus, and gathered for that, it doesn't matter how big the crowd is or when it happens or who is preaching or how they got ordained or by whom or their gender identity or sexual orientation or race or age or facial hair or grammar or creativity or any of that.

With that, we may notice that Jesus here isn't trying to lecture or teach or instruct us on models of unity. In a verse Luther says should be "written in pure gold" (LW 69.101), Jesus is praying for us. That must change the perspective, that it can't be about what we accomplish or how much accord we come to. That this is not just a competition or challenge also brings us, at last, to the good news. This prayer from Jesus promises unity not in those outward ways, but in love. The union that joins you is his love and God the Mother's love. It isn't in our behaviors that we are made one, but in being beloved. The blessing of his presence in you and among us is how we are united, is what makes us one. This is literally atonement, meaning this love is what makes us "at-one."

Our unanimity, then, isn't coerced or resolved. Rather, we begin and originate by very definition as unanimous; again, the word literally means "one Spirit," animated in unison. Though we may continue striving in patience to bear with one another, the one Holy Spirit that binds Jesus to his Father also binds us to them and to each other and that Spirit continues to hold us. We may explore that and live into it. We may even more fully comprehend that we can never be separate, that amid this cosmic community, all life is bound together with every breath we receive and give back. In all this, we may struggle against the outward negatives and may hope for more of the positives to highlight this union. But we can't create it and, by the love of God, we can't undo it and so, at our center, we proclaim that life that won't be stopped by wrongs, evils, or even death. Alleluia! Christ is risen!