

Sisters and brothers, grace and peace be yours from God our light and shield, from Christ our rock and redeemer, and from the Spirit our strength and sustainer. Amen

In his sermon at the opening Eucharist of the churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Milwaukee some years back, Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson told us who had gathered as voting members at that assembly that Christ was all the unity we needed, and since by our baptism into his life, death, and resurrection we *already had* Christ, therefore it followed that we already had all the unity we could ever need or ask for.

This he spoke to a Lutheran church sorely divided as are any number of denominations across the world on a variety of social and theological issues, not the least of which are issues related to human sexuality and interrelatedness.

Amid all our diversity, amid all our human differences, amid all that would and does divide, Christ and *Christ alone* is our unity.

Simple and yet profound.

Within our ability to grasp and seemingly beyond our ability to comprehend, let alone realize with our actions.

It reminds me of the ritual that many couples take during their wedding ceremonies, that ritual of the lighting of the unity candle.

Not quite exactly sure how this tradition came into being. It is certainly not in any of the rubrics of our church liturgies. It may have simply caught on by popular usage. But the lighting of one common candle

from the flames of two tapers, symbolic of the two persons being joined together, has become a powerful symbol not only of two becoming one, but of the presence of Christ amid the two, a visual ritual proclaiming the center of the relationship, the “glue,” or the “binding agent” of the two being Christ, and thus becoming one in Christ.

One has to wonder at times what the “glue” is, what the “binding agent” is in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as we face so much that threatens to divide. Even within our own communion, the ELCA.

This day marks the beginning of the globally-observed “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.” All across the world, Christians of every denomination and sect will gather in services similar to the one I participated in this past Friday evening in Santa Monica, praying to our most gracious God that there be more unity and less division among those who claim the name of Christ and seek to walk in his ways.

That old 1960s folk song – sung by many of us through the years - “They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love,” has often been mocked by skeptics from both inside and outside the Church. *“We will work with each other, we will work side-by-side; we will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand, and together we’ll spread the news that God is in our land...”* Indeed, it seems that more often they’ll know we are Christians by our divisions, by our fighting and bickering and back-biting, by our disagreements, and sadly, even by our hatred of each other and of others. We have certainly seen this recently as in the appointment of Pastor Rick Warren of the Saddleback (Mega) Church in Orange County to offer the invocation at the inauguration of President Barack Obama this coming Tuesday, as socially-progressive Christians bemoaned and decried the

choice of this clergyman whose church doesn't allow certain kinds of people as members.

For while one part of the body of Christ affirms all people and proclaims the love of God without condition and without reserve, another part of the body proclaims divine wrath on those who do not hold to a certain and specific set of beliefs and follow a prescribed code of "Christian" conduct, the dos-and-don'ts of holy living.

In the First Reading appointed for the Confession of St. Peter, the writer of the Book of Acts tells how Peter and John were "recognized as companions of Jesus" by their boldness despite their lack of education and ordinariness. It begs the question of us as individual followers and as "Jesus communities," how are we being recognized? What are the recognizable characteristics?

By our boldness or by our timidity?

By our doctrine or by our service?

By our open doors or by our closed-up attitudes?

By our acceptance of differences or by our indifference toward the diversity of humanity?

By our joy or by our furrowed brows?

By our love or by our fear toward anything which is not familiar?

Throughout the week ahead in churches throughout the world, Christians of every communion will gather together in worship and prayer. Lutherans will gather with Baptists, and Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics, and Methodists, and Moravians, and Episcopalians, and Congregationalists, and you name it. In some places perhaps the miraculous: some ELCA Lutherans may even gather with Missouri Synod Lutherans, but for the most part that is highly unlikely. But all those who

do, *will* gather and *will* celebrate our one Lord, our one faith, and our one baptism. And at the very same time acknowledging the stark reality that although we are brothers and sisters in Christ, in the family of followers of Jesus of Nazareth, we still cannot – all of us, all communions -- sit down and be together at his table, be at the meal of our common unity, our common union, our communion, together. Which begs the question: if we cannot even welcome *each other* to a common table, how can we ever expect to welcome a world which all too often holds the church at a safe and sane distance to keep from getting burned?

Peter's bold confession in our Gospel text this morning is the root of the church's unity.

“Who do people say that I am?” Jesus asked the disciples, to which he got a number of answers.

“But who do YOU say that I am?” he asked them more pointedly.

Peter's reply is the answer on which the church's unity rests:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

That confession alone was sufficient for Jesus. Upon the rock of *that* confession Christ built his church.

And yet, the followers of Jesus today have imposed other confessions and criterion which must ALSO be ascribed to in order for there to be unity sufficient to bring about a common table for one family.

In the early Church, three words were the common confession of a Christian: “Jesus is Lord.” If that was your confession, you were at the table together with others who also confessed those three words.

And so it is that such a week is necessary: that we come together with other Christians, and in our case today with this pulpit exchange with our

nearby ELCA Lutherans, to pray for the unity of the church, to pray away our sad divisions, and to pray ourselves back to the table of our common confession.

For like Peter, we all are capable of being absolutely bedrock in our confession in one instance, and then, when the waters gets rough (as they did for Peter), we begin to sink, or when the pressures get too great (as they did for Peter), we fail Christ when he needs us most.

But sisters and brothers, in spite of his human failings, Peter was ever-beloved of his Lord.

And, in spite of the countless ways in which its human flaws and failings are manifest, the church is ever-beloved of its Lord.

And, in spite of our own human sinfulness and natural rebellion toward God's ways, we, you and I, are ever-beloved of Christ without reserve and without question.

We have Christ. But even more so, Christ has us.

And he is *all the unity* we and this old church *of his* will ever need.

Amen