

Unity: Sermon. Easter 7. June 5 2011

Text: John 17: Jesus prayer “that they may be one”.

Handling insurance claims month after month, year after year, could get to be somewhat boring. But every now and then they get some really interesting cases. Here are a few actual quotations written by individuals in their automobile accident claim report.

“I collided with a stationary truck coming the other way.”

“Coming home I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don’t have.”

“I had been driving my car for forty years when I fell asleep at the wheel and had an accident.”

“An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my vehicle and vanished.”

“The pedestrian obviously had no idea which way he was going, so I ran over him”

“I pulled away from the side of the road, glanced at my mother-in-law, and drove straight over the embankment.”

In today’s gospel reading we have a prayer. But this is not just any prayer. It is unique. It is remarkable.

You could call it “the other Lord’s Prayer.”

Jesus prayed to God the Father for His disciples who were about to begin His Church.

Then He went on to pray for all His disciples who would ever come to believe in Him.

Think about that for a moment. - The Son of God prayed to God the Father Almighty for us.

Let the significance of it hit home.

Jesus prayed for you.

And what was the essence of this prayer? That we would be one. That we who believe would be unified in God's love and truth, just as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are unified.

The heart of the Lord's other Prayer for us is that we would be unified.

So, you can imagine how much our lack of unity must grieve Him. Jesus created the Church to be His continuation on earth.

Today we do not have one united Church but literally thousands of different denominations.

This fragmented Church is a rather poor advertisement for Christianity to the rest of the world.

Between denominations there are often bitter grievances.

Within local churches there are often bitter divisions.

This divisiveness tears the Church down, when we should be just getting on with the real tasks of ministering to the needy and bringing new people into the Kingdom of God.

The notion that our church is better and therefore is the true church, while another church has such and such wrong with it, and is not a true church is clearly a divisive idea.

What is it that keeps us from being one?

I'd like to mention three of the major obstacles to unity.

Judgmentalism:

None of us like to think of ourselves as judgmental. But we are all prone to making judgments on other people.

We can't help ourselves. It's human nature. We judge their hair, their clothing, their manner of speaking, and their attitude.

Another word for judgmentalism is prejudice.

None of us like prejudice, yet when we judge someone as being somehow less worthy than ourselves, we're guilty of a form of prejudice.

I am glad of the number of times God has showed me that there was much more to someone than I had initially supposed.

We will only have peace of mind and we will only find unity when we let go of judging and decide to forgive instead.

Another cause of disunity is self-sufficiency.

This is the proud idea that we don't need other believers to help us along life's way. Yet we all need encouragement, caring and mutual support.

A solitary self-sufficient Christian is an unhappy Christian. We have to choose sometimes whether we want to be happy, or we want to be right.

The Lord gave us all differing talents, so we all have something to bring to the table of mutual support.

A third cause of disunity is bitterness.

We have all been hurt.

It would be unlikely that anyone could reach the age of eighteen, never mind reach our ages, without having been deeply hurt.

And if we have had any lengthy association with the Church, it is quite likely that we have been hurt by someone else in the Church.

There may be some painful personal history.

If we allow that pain to remain in us as bitterness we add fuel to the very divisions we deplore.

The great news is that the Lord Jesus Himself has prayed for us, for our togetherness in Christ.

The cure, the only cure for bitterness and hurt is forgiveness.

One reason why the early Christian Church grew so dramatically was because they discovered the sense of community. They met in groups and they talked about strange and wonderful things...

The gruesome execution of a man nailed to a cross. An empty tomb. His ascension into Heaven. Miracles of healing. His teachings on love and forgiveness.

And it is forgiveness that provides the cure for disunity, and opens the door for unity and love.

In those early days of the Church it probably didn't make sense to onlookers, but there was something about the way the followers of Jesus spoke to one another; the way

they ate together, cried together and laughed together; the way they encouraged and helped one another; and above all the way they loved one another, that gave off a kind of “aroma of love” that magnetically attracted new people.

The early Christians met constantly to hear the apostles teach, to share a life in common, to break bread and to pray.

They devoted themselves to Christ’s teaching and they were committed to fellowship.

Nowadays people generally think of fellowship as a parish dinner. But just being at a social event doesn’t necessarily mean that we have fellowship with other people.

Fellowship means communion. It means putting unity into practice. It is sharing – sharing love, sharing blessings, sharing suffering.

Fellowship, of necessity means forgiving people,
forgiving family members,
forgiving fellow church members.

Christian fellowship is meeting together for mutual support and encouragement. God created us in such a way that our relationship with Him is nourished through our relationships with one another.

A Bishop, Geoffrey Paul, put it rather amusingly when he said:

“There is no way of belonging to Christ, except by belonging gladly and irrevocably to the glorious ragbag of saints and fatheads that make up the one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

God has given us this extraordinary gift of forgiveness as the key to breaking down disunity and encouraging unity to blossom and thrive.

The two biggest misunderstandings about forgiveness that people have are, one, that they think that in order to forgive they have to condone someone's wrongdoing; and, two, that they need to feel like forgiving someone before they do it.

But neither of those have anything to do with it.

We forgive in spite of someone's wrongdoing; and we forgive because it is what God expects of us.

A truly horrible event happened nearly five years ago, an event that makes many of the things we stay upset about seem very, very insignificant.

On October 6, 2006 a man went into a school classroom and murdered five young Amish girls and wounded five others.

Yet, very soon after, members of the Amish community went to visit the parents of the murderer, to let them know that they forgave. Such swift and generous forgiveness seemed inconceivable, but that is what they did.

Their ability to forgive is based on their deep faith in God, and on the power of community to support them in the face of abject horror.

This does not mean that they felt the pain, the grief and the anger any less than you or I would feel it.

It does mean that they faithfully put forgiveness into practice. It means their desire for revenge is overruled by their commitment to doing things God's way.

Forgiveness is woven into the fabric of the Amish culture and they gave the entire nation the most extraordinary example of the power of forgiveness.

In their community, forgiveness is taught to children from an early age, by the actions of their parents and adults.

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The Lord’s Prayer is one of the first things that an Amish child commits to memory, as most of us also did at an early age.

Jesus said to forgive seventy times seven; and one Amish man being interviewed said,

“If there are 490 victims we will keep on forgiving.”

Fifteen years ago year I was privileged to attend the largest gathering of clergy ever assembled in the history of the Church. More than forty thousand clergy from sixty denominations and fifteen nations, spent three days together in a football stadium, worshipping God, praying and listening to preaching. We resolved together to each

do our part to break down the walls of denominational separation.

What can each of us do to promote unity?

Unity begins with repenting of anything we may have done that has contributed to disunity.

We need to ask ourselves:

Can I embrace this idea of spiritual unity being fulfilled in my Church?

How will I act differently if I am committed to the unity of believers?

And above all - Who do I need to forgive?

If whenever you think of someone you feel a sense of annoyance, that is a clear sign that you need to forgive that person.

Not because you feel like forgiving them, because you almost certainly don't feel like it.

But simply because God expects us to forgive.

We need to look at what it is that unites us.

Or more accurately who unites us? Because we are united in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the source of our communion with God and our unity with one another.

We need to know that we really are brothers and sisters in Christ.

To truly discover the power of unity we must each take our part in putting it into practice.

There are many images to describe this unity.

Jesus spoke of Him being the vine, with us as the branches.

Paul wrote of “the Body of Christ” and “the communion of saints.”

It is essential to think of these not just as descriptive images, but as the Christian ideal.

There is one Body and one Spirit, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all.

Let there be unity and let it begin with us.