

Unity Marches Victorious in Diversity

John 17:20-26 • 2022-05-29 • 2022 Easter Series “Victorious”



Issues divide. I know it's been on everyone's mind lately. What happened this past week to the school children was tragic and heart-wrenching. It brings up the divisive topic of gun rights and gun restrictions. Rove V. Wade. If you know what that means you know how that topic also divides many people. Dare I mention masks, vaccines, and mandates? Those issues can divide people faster than you can get out a cough or a sneeze. Division is everywhere and happens all the time. Two people might kick off a friendship really well and enjoy each other's company. But if they find the other person is at the other end of a divisive issue, they break off the relationship at the drop of a hat. So many things divide this world!

How is it possible that anyone can achieve any sort of unity with a world that is so divided? And I'm not just talking about a superficial unity that rallies around a single topic. Jesus once prayed that all believers have "complete unity." And he described it as a perfect unity! How is this possible? Today we once again look at how the resurrected Jesus brings us victory. We will look at Jesus' prayer in John 17 to see how unity marches victorious in diversity.

Jesus was about to suffer, die, and after rising again ascend in glory back to the Father's side. So, the night before his suffering and death he prayed for his disciples. Firstly, he prayed for their protection. He knew that the hatred and division on first put on display when Cain murdered Able would continue. He knew that the world would hate his disciples even though they would be sharing a message of reconciliation. He prayed, "*Father, protect them by the power of your name.*" (Jn 17:11) For centuries after the apostles the Church suffered. John was the only one who didn't meet an early death. And for many years all Christians within the Roman Empire were forced to flee, hide, and suffer for the sake of the name of Christ.

But Jesus foresaw an even greater threat for his Church: division. That is why he prayed, "*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one.*" Notice he prayed for "*those who will believe in me through their message... all of them.*" It was a prayer for all future Christians. That means his prayer included the apostle Paul who needed to work in unity with Peter, James, and the leaders in Jerusalem. It means he prayed for the Corinthian Christians who were already forming divisions and factions over issues like the role of men and women, worship practices, and sexual immorality. It means he prayed for the Christians from across the known Christian world who gathered at Nicaea in the 4th century. They were free to worship without persecution, but not free from the divisions that threatened their unity. It means Jesus prayed for the men who met with Martin Luther to see if they might work together in agreement. It means he prayed for the founders of Lutheran churches in America who were forced to decide if they were conservative or liberal in theology. It means he prayed for the mission fields which our congregation supports today from Ukraine to Cameroon to Indonesia to Peru. It means he prayed for the Christian congregations you drove past this week. And it means he prayed for you, brothers and sisters in the faith. He prayed that "*all of them may be one.*"

And don't misunderstand. He was praying for true oneness, not an empty show of it. Jesus didn't pray that all Christians might be one by making some superficial façade of oneness. Calling a single person "papa" or "vicar of Christ on earth" or "President" doesn't make you truly united as one. Nor does disavowing the ecumenical confessions of faith make you one. Many churches, calling themselves non-denominational, have compromised a clear confession of faith. Unity means ignoring many parts of Scripture or being united in saying those parts must be too unclear to really find truth. Ignoring or dismissing differences in teaching doesn't really make you one with others. Unity is not achieved by ignoring what still causes division.

Jesus prayed for perfect harmony. He prayed for a sublime oneness which we can only begin to emulate. "*That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.*" Consider the high degree of unity Jesus prayed for! He wants all who believe to have a oneness which reflects the closeness between him and the Father. Jesus and the Father are two distinct persons, but one God, just as all of us confess, "one being with the Father." Whatever the Father wills, Jesus wills. Whatever the Father loves and delights in, Jesus loves and delights in. Whatever the Father considers wicked and wrong, the Son also hates and rejects.

Is that the kind of unity we have with other believers? Does the church across town have such a oneness with this congregation? Do we even have that kind of unity within our small congregation? Jesus prayed for you, and he prayed for all believers around you, "*that they may be one as we are one.*"

Has Jesus' prayer failed? When we see all the divisions between Christians today it may seem like the Father didn't answer the prayer of Jesus! Consider all the things which divide the Church around the world and throughout history! Teachings about conversion, justification, redemption, atonement, the working of the Spirit, the return of Christ, the means of grace, and the sacraments divide churches. I know it is not possible to enjoy perfect unity when there are obvious doctrinal disagreements. But can even those who agree on doctrine perfectly reflect the complete oneness

which Jesus calls for? And even for churches like ours which are united in teaching there are still issues that will threaten to divide. Worship style, leadership decisions, and superficial things which really don't matter. For example, small matters like deciding where to put Christmas decorations can end up dividing people.

Maybe you have felt the lack of oneness as you disagreed with your church leaders. Maybe you have felt the division from someone in your church family because of some disagreement in politics, social issues, or what type of worship music you like. And the division happens elsewhere. Christian husbands and wives, do you express perfect oneness in your marriage? And do you, children, show you are in perfect harmony with your Christian parents in love and respect? We are supposed to be one, completely one, just as Jesus and the Father are one. What happened?

It is not that Jesus' prayer failed. The Father did not fail. He has given his glorious Word and powerful gospel. *"I have given them my glory..."* When Christians fail to be in complete unity, they are the ones who have failed. When doctrinal divisions occur it is our own sinful failures which divide. When you fail to achieve complete peace with your pastor, with your fellow worshippers, with your spouse, with your Christian family, it is not God's failing. You and I have displayed the same animosity and division which the devil brought between the first man and women when they fell into sin. The failure is ours. Don't blame God. Look within yourself.

When we read Jesus' prayer for us and all believers we must confess: "Father, forgive me for breaking the oneness with my fellow believers." And we must join in praying, "May I be one with fellow believers, now, and forever."

God answers that prayer. The Church cannot remain divided. Because first off, he has made us one with himself. Just as the Son and Father are one and at peace with each other, we are one and at peace with our God. His love is ours! Jesus says, *"Father, I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."* The Father's love for you is so great that it measures the same as the love he has for the Son! In immeasurable love he sent his Son to this divided world. And the Son in equal love came to fulfill the Father's will. He made the love of God known as he took our place to remove the division between us and our God. He faced the price we deserved the sins which divided us from God and one another. And he died, the righteous Son for the unrighteous sinner. He did this to bring us to God, to be at one with himself. We are now at peace with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The division between us and God has ended! Unity has begun!

And the Church cannot remain divided because our ascended Lord has prayed that we will be with him in glory forever. *"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."* The Father will answer Jesus' prayer and you will behold his glory with your own eyes as you stand before his throne. You will join as one with all believers. Who will continue to hold onto division when the Way, the Truth, and the Life stands before our very eyes? All the division of false teachings and selfish pride will soon be behind us. We will be one with God in his eternal kingdom. Satan will no longer deceive. Death will never separate. Sin will no longer divide.

Jesus prayed for this future oneness to be reflected in his people today. He prays God's unifying love will be seen in you so that the world will also see the Father's love. The world will see you share a oneness which can't be broken by false teaching, can't be broken by preference for worship style or selfish pride. It is a perfect love that grows as we reflect the love which the Father has for the Son ...and has for us. Then what Jesus prayed is fulfilled, *"The world will know...and the world will believe... and they will be one."* God's love makes one what was once divided and broken.

He continues to make us one as we grow in faith, hope, and love. Jesus says he will, *"continue to make (the Father) known."* He does this as you unite around the truth of his Word and unite in love with all the believers who will join with you in love.

The early Lutheran Reformers desired unity. They first sought to get the Roman papacy on their side. When that failed, they didn't compromise Scripture. When they met with other Reformers and sought to join as one, they once again recognized unity seemed impossible. But still they desired unity and prayed for it, strove for it. And they let the Father answer that prayer. Join Christ in praying for complete unity. He answers that prayer. The blessings we enjoy in our Christian fellowship with oneness with over 25 Lutheran church bodies around the world stretch from Ukraine to Cameroon to Indonesia to Peru. There are so many diverse languages and cultures. There is so much that could divide us. But we are united in faith. Our congregation is diverse in ages ranging from two to nearly a hundred years old. But we are united in confession and faith. This isn't our working. It is the working of the Father who answered his Son's prayer for unity among believers. And he will continue to answer that prayer.

Do you want to see the divisions disappear? Do you want all believers to live as one? Do you want the world to see that unity and see the love of God? Jesus does. I do. I know you do too. And he will forever make us one as he answers our prayer: "Lord, let unity march victorious in diversity." May he answer this prayer from his holy throne until we see his glory there.