

**The Seventh Sunday of Easter • May 24, 2009**

*St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA*

*Rev. Braun Campbell*

John 17:6-19

*"Unity"*

Do you ever wonder if there's really any hope for unity in our world? During his presidential campaign, our new commander-in-chief voiced the frustration that many of us feel as we look at our government, seeing more discord than unity. He has vowed to do things in a new way, to change the practice of "business as usual"; however, he knew even then that he could not do this alone. He put forward the possibility of hope – that we could work together as a united people. Calling out to the citizens of America, he rallied supporters with the exclamation of "Yes we can!" But now that the new administration is in place and the business of governing has sped up, the hard work of unity looks even more impossible. It seems like people spend more time working against each other than they do working together. Living here in Alexandria, so close to Capitol Hill, we regularly have the "opportunity" to see the push-and-pull that is so often "business as usual" among the people who would lead our nation. Even in recent weeks, politicians have opposed each other on the closing of the controversial detention center at Guantanamo Bay. Rivalries have flared between political parties in yet another who-knew-what-when saga. All the while, major corporations and individuals across the country are still facing the challenges of the current economic climate. Faced with the disunity of our government, the answer to the question of whether or not we have the **ability** to truly change things – and if we even want to – moves from "Yes we can!" to "No we don't!" It'd take a miracle to bring a real unity into being.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is praying for such a miracle. If you've ever doubted that God cares about you and your life, listen especially to Jesus' prayer here in John 17. The verse immediately following our pericope – our designated reading – reveals that Jesus isn't just praying for Peter and Matthew and John and the other disciples: "*I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word...*" Jesus is praying for you! But what is he asking the Father to do? He makes three requests in our text – take a look with me. First, in **verse 11**, Jesus asks, "*Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.*" A few moments later, in **verse 15**, he prays, "*I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.*" The third and final request comes in **verse 17**: "*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*" And does the Father do these things for us, for Jesus' sake? Yes He does!

You might wonder, then, why we continue to have such disunity, even among Christians. The sheer number of Christian denominations gives evidence to our continued desire to go our own way, rather than seeking to reconcile with one another. There may be strife and political maneuvering happening in a congregation or church body – sometimes more scandalous than what you would find on Capitol Hill. Even here at St. John's, we sometimes fall short of the unity that Jesus wants for us: you might not know but a few of the people who are worshipping with you right now.

But Jesus' prayer isn't just meant as an encouragement for us to do the things for which he's asking. This whole prayer is gospel – good news! God does give us a deeper unity: He continues to call us together under the cross of Christ. It's there that Jesus suffered separation from the Father *because of* our disunity. We can gather around the cross as a united people because it is there that God brings forgiveness and healing, where He brings us back to Himself. The Father continues to answer Jesus' prayer, that we may be one even as he and the Father are one. Despite denominational differences, all those who believe in the Christian faith confessed in the creeds we

will speak in worship this day are united by the same, knit together in that hidden Church which spans time and space. Does God unite us? Yes He does!

The need for Jesus' second request is readily apparent: we can't hope to guard ourselves from the attacks of the evil one. In our disunity, we stray off into places – dangerous places – where we should not go. Even when we're not actively putting ourselves out in harm's way, harm might come looking for us. When Jesus prayed this prayer, he knew that his betrayal was at hand and that the devil's agents were coming to capture and kill him. Two thousand years later, the evil one still seeks to harm those who follow Jesus. But the Father still keeps us in His care.

God protects us in many ways, even though He does not take us out of this dangerous and dying world. Spiritually, He defends us in that unity we call the Church. In His sanctuary, in Word and Sacrament, God equips us for spiritual warfare against the evil one and the temptations of the world. God stands with us, and as we cling to Him in faith He carries us across those traps with which the devil would ensnare us. God protects us physically as well as spiritually, and this weekend our nation remembers one of instruments that God uses to do so. As we celebrate Memorial Day and honor all those men and women who have served in our country's armed forces, we can thank and honor God for the work that He has done and continues to do through them. Those who serve give of themselves so that the rest might continue to enjoy the rights and privileges we know in these United States. Through them, God guards our freedom to gather and worship Him openly, to speak out against the injustices of this world, and to share our life-giving faith. Does God keep us from the evil one? Yes He does!

As was the case with Jesus' second request, it's not hard to see that we always need God to sanctify us. We regularly think, speak, and act in ways that are not holy. We don't seek to be different from the world; all too often, we seek unity with an unholy world rather than unity in Christ. Every day, we need someone to call us back to the way we are meant to live: in relationship with God. And God does just that.

The unity that God brings for His people is indeed a miracle, something extraordinary. His work to sanctify us – breaking us away from our sin, bringing us to faith, and building us up in holy living – is a striking change from “business as usual.” Now, if you'd like a living illustration of how difficult we make God's work among us, consider this: after the worship service has ended today, before you run off to wherever you're planning to go, I challenge you to introduce yourself to the people in the pews around you – your family and good friends don't count here if you're looking to be clever – and learn a little bit about some of these other people for whom Jesus prayed. Change doesn't come easily among us, but that's what God is doing as He sanctifies us. He strengthens our relationship with Him, our unity in Christ. The truth of His Word calls us to consider the choices that we make and informs our interaction with the world around us. Though we can't be completely holy until we are reunited with Jesus in life beyond the reach of sin, God continues to empower us in living ever more Christ-like lives. Does God sanctify us? Yes He does!

**All of the things that Jesus asks for us from his Father, the Father gives us through the Holy Spirit.** In the words of Martin Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, the Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.” **The Holy Spirit makes unity a reality for us.** Even though the Spirit is not named in Jesus' prayer, what He does among us is anticipated in our Gospel lesson. Next week, we will observe another great day of the Church year, the festival of Pentecost. Pentecost celebrates the work of the Holy Spirit: drawing people to new life in Jesus' name, keeping them from the evil one, and building them up in faith, sanctifying them. May this coming Pentecost remind us that God the Father heard His Son's prayer – and continues to answer it today.

Does God give us hope for unity in this world? Indeed, yes He does!

Amen.