

Date: September 26, 2021 (Pentecost 18)

1. Texts: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Ps. 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50.
2. Subject: ecclesiology.
3. Topic: unity as proclamation.
4. Aim: encourage, guide.
5. Proposition: "The Church blesses God and proclaims his glory in its loving unity."

LOVING UNITY

We all know that we are "one in the Spirit, one in the Lord." We know that we all are members of the one Body of Christ and that we have been grafted onto Christ. Time and time again we've had the unity of the "one holy catholic and apostolic Church" drilled into our heads through an uncounted number of sermons.

Now, inside our parishes, this truth of the gospel is very much taken for granted. Our numbers are so small that we have to be unified. We can't survive disunity.

Inside our diocese it's something of a different matter. Each of our parishes is so busy trying to survive that there's little energy to be unified. Besides, the diocese is just the Church equivalent of the Canada Revenue Agency, so every parish wants to avoid the diocese as often as possible until some emergency arises.

The, within our communities there are frequent tensions amongst denominations. Apparently, some consider themselves doctrinally superior to others. Some won't associate with others, for fear of theological contamination by such association.

Unity is often a problem in the Church.

It's been a problem from the beginning. Back then it started with the disciples of John the Baptist. Then the divisions were focussed on the Jewish and non-Jewish Christians — or the Christians in Jerusalem and those in the provinces.

Then, disunity continued beyond the New Testament between Greek and Latin Christianity—and between trinitarian and non-trinitarian Christianity. Then between Catholics and Protestants AND amongst Protestants.

Unity in the Church has always been a problem, which is why it received so much attention in the New Testament. It's a problem now, which is why it forms the basis for so many sermons.

Simply repeating that we're *supposed* to be unified won't help. After all, it's been in the Bible for 2000 years, and we're still having problems with it. Simply repeating that Jesus *commands* us to be unified doesn't help. I'm not sure, but I'm hoping this will help.

Clearly, duty and command are not motivating forces. Obligation and power can create obedience, but that's hardly the same as being motivated to do something. To inspire, we have to somehow find the desire to do something. So, let's start with this.

'The first [commandment] is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'¹

Imagine then, how much we please God when we love one another. Imagine how much others will be blessed when we love one another. There will be joy amongst the angels in heaven when we on earth love one another.

Obviously, this kind of love is not a sentimental attachment to one another. Love is the choice to put the needs, hopes and goals of the other ahead of your own. Love is the commitment to trust the beloved, despite what others say. Love is practical and meaningful self-sacrifice for the sake of the beloved. No one "falls in love" as if it were an accident. Love is the choice to commit oneself to the life of the beloved.

¹ Mark 12:29-31.

Unity will inevitably arise out of such love. Unity is a necessary by-product of genuine love. Love creates the unity desired by God and as lived by Jesus.

How marvelous to bring joy to the heart of God. This desire to please our heavenly Father can be motivation enough.

I suggest that we create opportunities to bring joy to God. It won't be satisfying to just wait for some opportunity to fall into our laps. And then hope that we'll actually do the loving thing at that moment. We should plan to bring joy to God through acts of loving unity.

So, what might such acts be?

It could be closing down your own Sunday service and worshipping with another congregation that is struggling and donating all that you would have given to your own parish to them. Or maybe you could cooperate to bring an Afghani or Syrian family to your town. You could provide coffee time for the homeless or isolated elders in your town. You might provide volunteers for a walk-in vaccination clinic—and maybe host it in your own building while you provide transportation for people in need.

Then, you could work for or even host a food bank. Or host a Thanksgiving Supper for all the members of the local Ministerial Association. You could become involved in Samaritan's Purse ministries or host a community carol sing featuring the music ministries of other congregations. You could host a community supper to mark the end of Ramadan.

It seems that a heavy dose of imagination is required to make opportunities for loving unity. But surely, bringing pleasure to the heart of God is worth the effort.

We are one in the Spirit and one in the Lord, because that is the way God himself has made the Church. That unity is created by the self-sacrificing love of God, proven to us in Jesus of Nazareth. Every time we act according to unity and

love, we please God. Every time we turn inward in selfishness and isolation, we wound God.

But there is one more and very significant realization to be had: every act of loving unity becomes a proclamation of God's power and of Christ's gospel. Loving unity is actually a means of evangelization. Loving unity is one of the means by which we fulfill the Great Commission from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 28:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.²

Not only does our loving unity please God, it also proclaims God's glory.

With such a realization, we open ourselves up to pray what we mean and mean what we pray with today's collect:

Grant, O merciful God,
that your Church,
being gathered by your Holy Spirit into one,
may show forth your power among all peoples,
to the glory of your name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.³

AMEN.

² Matthew 28:18-20.

³ "The Collect for Proper 26", *The Book of Alternative Services*, Toronto, 1985, p. 383.