



THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

23 May 2004

UNITY IN A WORLD OF SIN

Grace, Mercy and Peace.....

The title of this sermon was originally going to be "Was Jesus a Communist?" In the chapters of John there is all this talk of unity when we know that it is more natural for men to be divided than to be united. It is more human for men to fly apart than to come together. Unity is not a natural state. At least not in a world of sin.

The big problem with Jesus and Pope John the XXIII is that they gave the world a vision of love and unity and then left this earth without leaving a blue print. But some of us old fogies tried way back when.

Thirty years ago this fall on Reformation Sunday I invited a Roman Catholic priest friend of mine by the name of Joe Girzone to come and preach for me. Joe makes several million dollars a year writing and selling Joshua Books. In fact he made me a bishop in one of them. Bishop Donald Marxhausen otherwise known as Big Bear. So, to nine million Roman Catholics I am a bishop. You can kiss my ring after the service.

My first congregation was a church building about this size that sat 600. There were only about 180 at a service, but they were all stubborn Germans. Ed Liedkfeldt, a big pipe fitter for General Electric, was the lead usher that day. In a stage whisper that everyone could hear he said, "Was ist das Priest doing on the altar?" People started to tremble. They didn't want to cross Big Ed.

In those days the Hymn of the Day was sung before the sermon. During the hymn Father Girzone came over and asked for a blessing so that the people would hear him speak. His text was from John 17 using the lines "that we may be one." After the sermon Big Ed said, again in a stage whisper, "I tink I take communion." However during the Sursam Corde which is where the pastor says, "Lift up your hearts," several people lifted up more than their hearts and walked out. The following Tuesday at the council meeting I was asked why I didn't ask permission to bring in a Catholic Priest. I answered, "because you wouldn't have given it." We had about an hour of brouhaha when the one token woman on the council (the secretary) broke in with tears and said, "I wish it were this way thirty years ago when my husband and I got married. He is Catholic and we have never been able to have communion together." There was silence, and it suddenly dawned on them what I was trying to do.

Every other Tuesday I attend a prayer meeting in Brighton. It is mostly Evangelicals and Baptists. Two American Baptists come and one Presbyterian woman pastor so I am not totally alone. Other mainliners do not come. I am in charge of getting the next meeting at the Catholic Church where the priest is a pretty sharp guy. We already had some tension a few months ago when I asked that the Independent Baptists stop praying against the abomination of homosexuals. I announced that my pastor is one and so is probably my daughter. A lot of chill in the room, but some keep coming. The Presbyterian pastor grew up Missouri Synod. The two of us being scarred for life and were both insulted by Jake Preus. We kind of support each other. This last Tuesday she said, I am not comfortable here because I am afraid that we speak a different language. She had in her hand a copy of the book some of us studied here, "The Heart of Christianity." That led to some interesting discussion with one of the pastors coming at me and saying "Don, you don't believe us conservatives have any compassion." And off we went. But everyone hung in there. Lots of work

to do.

I look at the nearly dead or dormant ecumenical dream and I look at the divisiveness within this state and country and I wonder if Jesus was off the mark on this issue. If John remembered these words correctly Jesus is saying them in less than 24 hours before He was going to be dead. Maybe he had drunk too much wine and was tripping out. Unity? In this world of sin?

Maybe it is sin that can unite us. William Sloan Coffin said, "If we are not as yet joined one to another in love, we most surely are in sin, and sin is a wonderful bond because it precludes the possibility of separation through judgment."

I preached and ran three worship services at the Jail yesterday. Two men's services and one woman's. There is for a brief minute unity among the inmates. They want to be free or home or with their loved ones or for some back out on the streets and into the game. But they are where they don't want to be. They have lost houses, apartments, cars, family members and children along with years of freedom. Many of them leave jail with just the clothes on their back and not even identification. One man said to me on Tuesday, "I no longer need to be an Apache, which is tattooed on his stomach, but a person. I'm forty-two and have spent most of my life in jail."

Ever since the Tower of Babel, human kind has been known for its separateness rather than its unity.

The cause of Christian unity at the present time and through history has been injured and hindered because men loved their own ecclesiastical organization, their own creeds, their own ritual, more than they loved each other. We seek to be an inclusive community here at St. Paul's Lutheran. But the growing churches are often exclusive. They are either anti this or anti that. People still need to justify themselves by disliking somebody.

I think of all the families of Nine/Eleven or the victims' families of Columbine. They are people of great loss and their differences are overcome with the radical depth of their pain. The enemy of Nine/Eleven is our country and some unseen force. The enemy of Columbine is the big question why?

There is a German concept called "Mitgeföhl" or the fellowship of suffering. I believe that is negative unity. Good in that misery loves company. But I think we also come together in fellowship of being forgiven. You and I have been forgiven and on a good day we remember that we are also loved and on even a better day we remember that grace has intersected our lives more than once and we have a God who has brought us out of a miry bog and placed our feet upon a rock and therefore we now sing a new song unto the lord.An Easter song that God raises up and He or She has done that for us time and time again from depths from which we often thought we would never recover.

As we wind down this Easter season and prepare for celebrating the birthday of the church we remember the shared experience of freedom as if we crossed the Red Sea ourselves. We remember that we have faced the truth of ourselves and love has found us and bound us together, not because we are somebody, but because we who have been lost have been found and because he first loved us we are able to love one another.

I tell the inmates that if you are catholic you probably shouldn't receive communion and if you are protestant you better check if you are the right protestant, but if you hear Jesus, the Jesus who bids us all to come, then all of you are invited to receive because Jesus ain't got no checklist. And so are we invited here today as well. Or as Kevin says: My brother and sister, the Body of Christ for You. That is one heck of a unity. AMEN