

***John 17:1-11 – One in Jesus and one in love.***

The history of the Christian Church is quite fascinating. As we see in Jesus' prayer that forms our text, as he prays for his followers who will be left behind in the world after his ascension (celebrated last Thursday), he asks his heavenly Father to protect them and keep them united. He says: "Holy Father, protect them (my disciples) by the power of your name ... so that they may be one as we are one."

Well, what does the history of the church show? God hasn't done a very good job as keeping Christianity united, has he? Think of church history as a whole. For about 1100 years Christianity sort of stayed together, despite big theological arguments and various split-aways. But then came the big break between the eastern (Orthodox) and western (Roman Catholic) churches. 500 years ago exactly came the next big break, between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. And Protestantism split into all those other pieces that most of us are familiar with – Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Reformed, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists, etc., with further divisions within each of those bodies.

Many of us probably reflect some of that church history in our own church lives. For instance, my Italian father was Roman Catholic and my Finnish mother was Lutheran, but there was no Lutheran church in Ingham when I was born, so I was baptised by the local Methodist minister, and for the first 5 years of my life attended the Methodist Church. Then a Lutheran Congregation formed there, and the members were first served by bi-lingual Finnish/English speaking pastors who came from the USA. However, since our pastor also served Finnish Lutheran groups in Tully, Atherton and Mt. Isa, we children didn't even have regular Sunday School, so my Christian education was fairly scrappy. There was a Lutheran church down the highway in Townsville, but they were the dreaded "other synod", the UELCA, and we were ELCA, and we weren't supposed to have anything to do with those false teaching heretics, even though we did, especially after my older sister's first teaching posting was in Townsville.

Then my devout Finnish grandparents paid for me (and my brothers and sisters) to attend the ELCA's Concordia Memorial College in Toowoomba for my secondary schooling. There through confirmation lessons and reading the Bible, I came to a better appreciation of our Lutheran understanding of God as a God of grace, revealed through Jesus, and decided that I wanted to be a pastor and to share that good news with others. So off I went to Concordia Seminary in Adelaide for training as a pastor. There I also learned in detail how all other Christian Churches had false teachings. In fact many sermons I heard over those years included warnings against having anything to do with those who held to false doctrines.

But as church history also shows, God has a way of keeping his wandering children from wandering too far. As far back as the late 1800s there were stirrings of change and the ecumenical movement came into being. The lofty goal of this movement was that the divisions in Christianity might be healed and that there might be just one Christian Church in the whole world (the meaning of the word "ecumenical"). And right from the start Jesus' words in today's text "that they may be one" have been the motto and the motivation for believers across the denominations to work towards this goal.

So how far have we come? Most people would perhaps answer: "Not very far." Since imperfect people are involved, it shouldn't surprise us that false steps have been taken and progress has been slow. Nor should we be surprised by the difficulties involved in trying to unravel the different theologies and different structures that the different denominations have developed over hundreds of years. But through official dialogues and through ordinary personal contact the previous unhelpful barriers, foolish competition, and even hurtful accusations are being overcome. Today we have the National Council of Christian Churches and Queensland Churches Together where Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant denominations seek to improve their

combined Christian work and witness, which is very necessary as the materialistic western world seems to turn its back on Christianity.

As for us Lutherans – well, we are celebrating the 50 years of existence of the LCA, and most members of our congregations are hardly aware that there once existed the ELCA and the UELCA. Best of all, as an ex-ELCA person, I am so glad that we have done away with the ridiculous idea we once had that praying with a fellow-Christian who did not belong to the ELCA was “sinful unionism.”

That’s a rather long introduction to what I really want to share with you this morning, namely, that despite what we see in the world around us, there is only one Christian Church, the “communion of saints” that we proclaim in the Apostolic Creed. This one community is made up of all those who know and trust in the loving and forgiving God revealed to us by Jesus. So Olivia and Sidney were not baptized into the Lutheran Church today but into the Church of Jesus Christ, to be God’s children in the world, to live out and reflect God’s love in the world.

So there is only one question for each of us here today. Do you and do I know and believe in the one true God and Jesus Christ whom God sent into our world? Then you are a member of Christ’s Church, and then you too are called to live out and reflect God’s love in the world. And a substantial part of that Christian living is to be ecumenical, to demonstrate and declare the oneness of all Christian believers, whatever the denominational tag they might be wearing. May the Holy Spirit lead us all to find ways of doing that effectively. As the Gospel song puts it: May we be one, bound in love for ever,

Growing close together day by day;

Growing as God fills us with his life;

We are joined in Him, He makes us one. Amen.`