

FIFTH LENTEN VESPERS

John 17

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”

Pope John Paul II has said, “Our divisions prevent our neighbors from hearing the Gospel as they should.” I know it may be hard to believe, but I am going to disagree with him. Think about his statement: “Our divisions prevent our neighbors from hearing the Gospel as they should.” It sounds nice with a warm and fuzzy ring to it, but it is false. Our divisions do not prevent our neighbors from hearing the Gospel as they should; our divisions are a result of the inability or unwillingness of some to proclaim the Gospel they should, as God gave it. Lutheran churches and Roman Catholic churches cannot work together to share the Gospel, because they do not agree on what the Gospel is. That is why there was a Reformation. Lutherans insisted on proclaiming the Gospel as Scripture alone taught it. The pope insisted his Gospel be proclaimed, which was really no Gospel at all.

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Did you hear that? The church is to be unified as the Father and Son are unified. The Father and Son are not unified on some things. They do not agree to disagree on what they are or believe. They are not simply outwardly organized for functional purposes. They are one in mind, in heart, and in purpose. Theirs is a real unity, and ours is to be the same.

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” How many Pilates don’t we have among us, even in the church? *“What is truth?”* they ask, and few are able to provide an answer, increasingly even within our own fellowship. *“What is truth?”* Is that not what we inquire every time we fail to boldly confess what the Scriptures confess? *“What is truth?”* Is that not what we ask when we divorce our teaching from our practice, and do things that teach the opposite of what we claim to believe? *“What is truth?”* Is that not what we wonder when we fail to show real love by disciplining those who are in persistent sin, for fear of a world that knows little of a love that chastises? *“What is truth?”* Is that not what we propose as we increasingly devalue the Christian education of our children, whether it be home devotions, Sunday school, or Lutheran schools of all levels? *“What is truth?”* Is that not what we tell our loved ones when we remain silent while they neglect the Means of Grace by neglecting God’s service? There is no unity in that question, *“What is truth?”* Unity is found only in Jesus’ prayer: *“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”*

I recently had the privilege of listening to two young members of our congregation playing in outstanding bands for Freeland’s schools. Both bands were very large, which was impressive. But do you know what was more impressive? They played in harmony. The fact that it was a large band would have only made things worse if they had not played together. People were not there to see a lot of teens in similar dress. They were there to hear unified tones and melodies, and that is what they got, as the unity they expressed in harmonious concert with each other was beautiful and accomplished great things in the ears of the audience.

Not long ago, many churches issued calls for unity, convinced there was nothing a unified Christendom could not do. Their desire was pious, but their method was not. To

achieve a superficial unity, beliefs were compromised, standards were lowered, and definitions were slackened. A lowest-common-denominator Christianity was established, boiled down to the idea that a Christian is anyone who follows Jesus. What does that mean? I don't know, but that's the point. The Gospel has not been better heard by our neighbors through such unity; they have only become more confused, so that now most think Christianity's chief message is one of the law, namely, love one another. How should we love one another? Not everyone agrees on that. Why should we love one another? Not everyone agrees on that. What exactly is love? Not everyone agrees on that either.

Jesus says what kind of unity and disciples He seeks: *"For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me."* A Christian receives the words the Father gave Christ. Christ makes no distinction between important and unimportant, fundamental or non-fundamental words. Christian disciples simply receive the words given by the Father through the Son, recorded for us by the Holy Spirit in Holy Scripture.

"An Irish Protestant who was dangerously ill and believed he was dying sent for a Catholic priest and was received into the Catholic Church. His Protestant friends were horrified and one of them asked him how he could thus forsake the creed for which he had stood all his life and go over to the enemy. 'Well,' said the sick man, 'it's this way. I said to myself, if anyone's got to die, better one of their lot than one of our lot'" (K. Edwards).

We do not separate ourselves from other Christians out of bitterness or with malicious intent. The opposite is true. We separate out of love, that through our show of concern for the truth, others may see their error and come to know Christ better. We do not damn other Christians to hell—the Lutheran Church has never done that, only Rome has. We do not claim to be morally or intellectually superior to others. We simply are conscience-bound to the truth and to preserve the unity found only in it. We do not even deny that we are one in Christ with other believers in the hidden Church, the holy Christian Church, and that we will one day enjoy complete and joyous fellowship in heaven. We realize and confess that Christ saves through faith, not church membership. By our fellowship practices, we are merely doing our best to heed Christ's biblical call to true visible unity in this life, which is found only in the whole truth of His Word, and through which alone the Gospel can be clearly proclaimed. No responsible physician would open a practice with a doctor who rather frequently medicated patients improperly. No responsible Christian will join in fellowship with Christians who regularly misapply God's Word to the great detriment of sick souls.

I think if I stood on the corner and gave away unopened Cokes most people would take them, but if I opened them and put in even one drop of rat poison most would pass. St. Paul warns in Galatians, *"A little leaven leavens the whole lump"* (5:9). And in 2 Timothy, *"Avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene"* (16-17). Our Lord prays, *"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."* May we heed St. Paul's warnings in this coming week! May our Lord's prayer be answered in us! As our Lord enters Jerusalem on Sunday and journeys from shouts of glad hosannas to bloodthirsty calls to crucify, let us not only agree to watch what happens, but let us agree on what it means, that we may then proclaim

it in wonderful harmony to our friends, to our community, and to our world. May we be sanctified by the truth! God's Word is truth. Amen.