

This is the last Sunday in the Easter season. John's Gospel reading for today gives us what church scholars call our Lord's "Prayer for the Church." The prayer asks God our Father for what seems to be impossible: the unity of the Christian Church. We have pleaded with God for unity for two thousand years. If anything, we are further from the goal than we have ever been. That does not say much for our understanding and acceptance of our Lord's message of unity and love. I think that what Christ wanted for his Church is for us to be a family bound together by a shared love of God, a love that does not mold differences into one conglomerate whole, but rather transcends differences to unite us as one in the presence of God. The differences do not go away, and I don't think that Christ ever intended us to be clones of one another, but he did expect the Church to remain a cohesive whole through common love.

This is a message that we desperately need to hear, and this is the message of John's gospel passage this morning, but a problem we have is understanding the message. I think that only Saint Paul rivals John in the ability to twist language into what can only be described as nearly an undecipherable mess. Our Lord's prayer for the church can pass us by without notice because we get lost in John's twisted words. So let me be bold and help the late evangelist, Saint John, with English language and syntax. Let me try to translate Saint John's rendering of our Lord's "Prayer for the Church."

"Father," Jesus said, "I'm asking you for more help for my Church than these apostles that you have given me can handle. I'm looking to the future, as well, and those who will come to me, over the years, as disciples, charged with the same task of spreading the good news of your love for humanity and this world. Keep them united, Lord, for if they are at odds with one another, they will not be effective. I want them to bring the world to you, through me and through their own good works, so that the world will understand that you and I are one.

"No one knows you, Father, as I do, but if my disciples can just love each other with the same love that I have for them, the same love that you and I have for each other, then they will succeed because of that love. Our love is perfect love, and nothing can overcome it. If they will remain united in our love, then the world will know your glory and will know that I am your Son and I am the Redeemer."

Now, if you don't think that this is an accurate translation and interpretation of what John tried to say in the Gospel, I invite you to pick up a good modern translation of the Bible and read the passage and compare it to my rendition. It's important that we understand the message, because this prayer really states the mission of the church, and that mission is to know Christ and make him known. Today we celebrate the seventh Sunday of Easter, the last Sunday before Pentecost. Pentecost is the birthday of the Church. The Church has lasted for over two thousand years only because it has tried its best to remain true to its mission, of revealing God to the world through Jesus Christ. If it ever fails that mission, then the church will simply die.

The most significant threat to this work of Christ is division within his Body, the Church. Christians can differ in custom, differ in doctrinal understanding, and even differ in their understanding of Christian behavior, what's sin and what's not sin, and they can debate to their hearts content. We actually grow in our Christian understanding of God's love and God's purpose when we challenge each other's thinking. So long as we are united in Christian love, all is well. It is when we stop loving and try to drive the other side out that we betray Christ and no longer make him known. Our Lord's prayer

is a prayer for love. Love is the one essential. Everything else is really just commentary on love.
Amen.