

The Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year C, 2010

John 17:20-26

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The gospel, today, gives us a prayer that asks God for the nearly impossible. If the Evangelist, Saint John, did not attribute this prayer to Jesus, we'd wonder what he was smoking on that island of Patmos, where Christian legend has that John, our Lord's Apostle, did his writing. This prayer in today's gospel asks for something that challenges humanity to the core. The "Great Prayer for the Church," as bible scholars call this passage, is a prayer asking for Christian unity, not unity of mind and unity of doctrine, as we so often interpret it, but unity in spirit, unity in love. It is a prayer that we may find ourselves a family bound together by a shared love of God in Christ, a love that does not mold differences into one consistent whole, but rather transcends differences to unite us as one in the presence of God. The differences do not go away. Uniqueness builds the body of Christ. But the parts of the body are bound by common love. Indeed, the love defines the body that is the Church.

The problem with the Gospel today is in understanding it. The reality is that only Saint Paul rivals Saint John in the ability to twist language into an almost totally undecipherable mess. The gospel passage today is so convoluted, and so impossibly hard to understand, that it can pass us by without real notice because we simply shut our minds off after getting lost in John's words. So, let me be bold and help John with language and syntax. Let me translate Saint John rendering of our Lord's Great Prayer for you. I give you my rendition of what the Apostle John really meant to say.

"Father," Jesus said, "I'm asking you for more help for my Church than these guys 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, Father, 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, 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."

Some weeks ago, I told you that the Church has a mission, and that mission, simply stated, is to know Christ and to make him known. If the Church ever does adequately fulfill that mission, then the ancient prophecy of Isaiah will indeed be fulfilled. Isaiah said that the day will come when "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation

will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” Now wouldn’t that be something, if the world could truly be united, be one family in God through the Risen Christ?

The Church tries, it really does, and it has maintained its identity, if not always its integrity, for two-thousand years, and the success that it has had comes only because it has attempted, even if far from perfectly, to know Christ and to make him known. The bottom line is that we have nothing to give but this, nothing to offer the world other than the chance to know Jesus Christ. And when we lose sight of this, and start treating fellow Christians not with the love that Christ commands, but with scorn, ridicule, derision and anger, then those outside the body of Christ, the Christian Church, certainly are not going to want to come in.

What we see in the Christian world today, is tragic. We are so divided that we hardly recognize one another as Christians, and this threatens the work of Christ. We can differ – within our parish, within our denomination, within our communion, or with the whole Christian world. We can differ in custom, doctrinal understanding, moral theology – what’s a sin and not a sin, what’s a virtue and not a virtue. We can debate to our 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.

This is the point that John was making in the gospel reading this morning. This is what our Lord’s prayer for unity was all about – that we might be one, different, yet united by the one thing that distinguishes true Christians: Christian love. When we are bound together in that love, then we will, truly, unequivocally, know Christ and make him known. Amen.