

### One Is the Loveliest Number

This past Thursday, we celebrated the Ascension of our Lord, as he took his rightful place of authority and power in heaven. We look forward to that heavenly home, especially with all these visions we've been hearing in the readings from Revelation. Maybe you've heard this joke about the paradise that waits for us: When a man died and got to the pearly gates, Peter was there to give him a tour. The man walked along with awe as he saw fellow Christians in joy; Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Evangelicals. Suddenly Peter told the man to be very quiet. Once they had walked past a closed room, Peter told him they could speak again. The man asked, "Who's in there?" Peter whispered, "Those are the Lutherans. They think they're the only ones here."

What does this say about our view of heaven? What does it tell us about Christ's Church here on earth? When Christ ascended into heaven, there were twelve apostles, not dozens of denominations. And before Jesus left, he prayed to his Father that his believers - not just those dozen disciples, but *all* who would come to believe by their message - that all of them would be one. As we focus on unity today, we see that one is the loveliest number. We rejoice in the unity we have with God and with one another, all made possible through Christ.

Unity is a grand ideal, isn't it? If we could all just get along. World peace. No debates or arguments, no tearing others down, no discrimination or war, just unity and peace. But it seems like a pie-in-the-sky ideal. It's not realistic. Even our view of heaven in that joke shows how naturally divided we are.

The Church has been split again and again throughout history. And that's not just a modern development. Do you think those twelve apostles always got along? They constantly argued about who would be the greatest among them! They sought individual honor, not the good of the group. As the early missionaries went out to spread the gospel, they often disagreed: Should the Gentiles become like Jews? Who's an adequate partner to take along with us? Where should we go? They weren't always united as one.

Jesus could foresee how much sin separates us. He knew from eternity how our sin tears our relationships apart. From the very first fall, every union was broken. The blessedness Adam and Eve experienced with God - gone. The sacred bond of man and woman in marriage - tainted by blame and shame.

The first brothers couldn't maintain a loving connection; jealousy and spite turned to murder. Our sin breaks down our bonds and throws up barriers. By nature we're not one; we are infected, isolated individuals, separated from God and from one another.

But our great God, who exemplifies unity, who demonstrates a oneness that goes beyond what our minds can grasp, this Three-in-One God has always been united in mission. The Father has always loved the Son, begotten from eternity. God gave Jesus this glorious work of salvation. This was his glory - to come into this fractured world and make it one. God loved Jesus from before the creation of the world, and he sent his Son to show this love, this unity, this bond. Through the Triune God, we experience how a true, loving unity works.

Of course, we couldn't know the Three-in-One God if Jesus didn't make him known to us. The love that drives our relational God didn't just want to have unity among the persons of the Trinity. Our Lord, who is love, wanted to be one with us. So, the Father sent the Son to show us who God is so that we may be one with him, even as they are one with each other. It's incredible what God is doing for us. The Trinity has this mysterious, incomprehensible unity. And God says, "I want that same kind of unity with my creatures."

That oneness becomes possible through Christ. He carried out the Father's labor of love by keeping the law. He didn't isolate himself or avoid people he didn't like. He didn't only gather with people who agreed with him. Even as the greatest individual who ever lived, Jesus didn't seek personal glory. He came to share his glory, to gather us as one with him. Jesus' work was to tear down every barrier that separates us from God and from one another. Christ came as the Redeemer to reconcile our ruined relationships. He is the One who makes us one.

The Father sent the Son, and by the work of the Holy Spirit, we believe that to be true. We have heard the message preached by those disciples, and by grace, we've received faith. That gift of faith from God connects us with God. In this bond, as we are one with the Lord, we receive the same gifts the Son received from his Father: love, glory, a place by his side in eternity. What joy that, through Christ's death and resurrection, we're no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens in the kingdom of God!

But we're not just united with God. Jesus' prayer is that all believers may be one. If we're one with God, we're also called to be one with each other. Jesus wants us to be brought into complete unity. Oh, we're back to our pie-in-the-

sky ideal. We so easily see separation all around us. There's an endless list of things that divide us in life - age, race, career path, phase of life, education gaps, cultural differences, interests, opinions, sports and entertainment, art, income, the way you dress, eat, speak.

We're a diverse bunch, and we don't always get along. Sometimes it seems easier to just be with the people who are like you. Or even better, the only person I can get along with is *me*. Our society is becoming more and more isolated, individualized. When every ad, every service is personalized, catered to *me, me, me*. In this case, one becomes the loneliest number.

It's no wonder that loneliness is an epidemic sweeping our nation. We think we have so many "friends," so many opportunities for connection. But when we're so driven by self-promotion, self-gratification, self-image, our oneness breaks down. Jesus wants the love that the Father has for him, the love that he has for us - he wants that love between us so that we may be one. There's a reason that the New Testament is filled with instructions that teach us how to treat one another. We weren't called to be one *alone*, as an isolated individual. We're called to be one *together*.

Think of the blessed pictures of unity God has given us, beyond the Trinity. We already touched on one: marriage. Here is a union unlike any other. Two become one flesh. Husband and wife share everything in life, they are committed to caring for each other, they make sacrifices to support each other. When the world sees a lasting marriage, a couple whose bond perseveres for decades, the world takes notice. That's something otherworldly, a unity unlike any other.

We're going to witness another blessed union later in this service. We often call the Lord's Supper "Communion." This is our common union. Yes, it's a unity with God, as we receive the very body and blood of Christ united with the bread and the wine. We are connected with the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation that come in Jesus' name. But we're also experiencing oneness with each other. Our common union in this meal is our shared faith in Jesus. We are all one loaf, one body, as we partake of one loaf. We all believe in the reality of what we're receiving for the forgiveness of ALL our sins. This isn't just a meal for me. It's a shared banquet between us and all believers.

If we're called to be bound together in such a blessed way - to be one as a husband and wife are, to hold things in common as we do at the Lord's Table, to be united just like the Trinity - how can we demonstrate this

oneness? Coming to church is a great place to start. It's wonderful to have personal devotions and prayer within your own homes. God wants us to meditate on his Word day and night. But he also calls us to encourage one another by gathering together. When you come to worship, is it an individual experience? Is it just God speaking to you, and you speaking to God, and then you go right out the door to your car, back to your own home?

God has called us all to be one, to share our lives - rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. How well do you know the lives of the people around you? I'm so grateful for our Member Spotlights, so we can learn about the person next to us in the pew. Even better than reading the Spotlights? Talk to the people around you. Ask about their family, their work, their hobbies. Learn about the body of Christ. Which members are thriving, and how can you celebrate with them? Which members are hurting, and how can you lift them up? We are in this life together, to help and to hold each other. Look for that person you don't know, who might not be like you, who you'd instinctively avoid. Remember that you are one with God, that fellow believer is one with God, and therefore, you are one with each other!

It's going to be so great when our new Picture Directory comes soon. We'll each be able to put names to faces. We can peruse how diverse our church is - all different families, ages, life stories, individuals. But we are all one. We are blessed and bound by Christ so that we're one with God and one with each other. As we keep exploring ways to appreciate this unity, the world's gonna take notice. They will know that the Father sent the Son as the Spirit works through us. The world will know that one is the loveliest number - not a loner, all-by-myself one. But a united one that shares the glory and love of God.

As Jesus prayed for us, let's pray for the world that they may be one as Christ is one with us and we are one with each other.

Father, we pray for those who will believe in you through the message we proclaim. Lord, we want all those around us to join in perfect unity with us, just as we're united with you. We want them to believe that you sent your Son to save the whole world, because you love them, just as you love us. We want them to be where we're going and to see your glory too. The world doesn't know you like we do, but you have made yourself known to us. Keep working through our oneness so that they can be one with you and one with us now and forever. Amen.