17th Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1966

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IN NOMINE JESU

Ephesians 4: 1-3 I entreat you, then - I, a prisoner for the Lord's sake: as God has called you, live up to your calling. Be humble always and gentle, and patient too. Be forbearing with one another and charitable. Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives.

ONE IN CHRIST!

To those who look in from the outside, what is the most impressive fact, the one thing they first notice, about the church which professes its faith in Christ the Savior? Is it that conviction of Christian people which in the apostolic age turned that topsy-turvy world upside down? Or is it the love of Christian people which caused their unbelieving neighbors in the apostolic age to exclaim, Behold, how they love one another? Or is it the kind of unity and oneness in Christ - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all - that St. Paul talks about in our text? You know the answer as well as I do; and I hope it bothers and distresses your conscience as much or more than mine. Across the world, in almost every country where the church lives and works, the first, deepest, and most lasting impression it gives is one of disunity - disunity punctuated by bitter competition, deep-seated jealousy, envy, suspicion, and conflict. Our sadly divided world is confronted by a sadly divided church, which frequently displays all the characteristics of the world to which it claims to bring salvation through the grace of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. We must face the hard fact that to many people outside the church the Christian faith appears to be phony and an utter sham rather than a living reality.

Our Lord did not intend His church to be a collection of warring sects. It is the will of Christ that His church be one. This fact is very evident from a striking section of our Lord's dramatic prayer offered to His Father on the night of His betrayal. He was praying for the church then and the church throughout all the ages of history: Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word: that they all may be one as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee; that they also may be one in Us; that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me. And the glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them that they may be one, even as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me and hast loved

them, as Thou hast loved Me. This passage gives no comfort to those who look upon disunity in the church as a welcome, essential, or even divine characteristic of Christendom.

The early Christians had their problems too. Then as now factions were at work striving to rend the church asunder, poisoning the life of the Christian community itself and offering a terrible witness to the community outside the church. Wherever and whenever these factions arose, threatening the unity of the early church, the apostles put a quick end to them - not negatively, but positively. The church in Ephesus was plagued by the pride and prejudice of Jewish Christians who felt themselves a little bit above and superior to the Gentile Christians. We belong to God's original people, they thought. We're the children of Abraham. Therefore, we must be one notch above these gentiles. This attitude was much the same as the church is facing today in the racial prejudice and bigotry between white Christians and Negro Christians. St. Paul minced no words in setting them straight. Speaking to the Gentiles he said: Now in union with Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near through the shedding of Christ's blood. For He is Himself our peace. Gentiles and Jews, He has made the two one, and in His own body of flesh and blood has broken down the enmity which stood like a dividing wall between them; for He annulled the law with its rules and regulations, so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in Himself, thereby making peace. This was His purpose, to reconcile the two in a single body to God through the Cross. Upon saying this the apostle gives them, both Jews and Gentiles, a bit of practical, positive, evangelical advice: I entreat you, then - I, a prisoner for the Lord's sake: as God has called you, live up to your calling. Be humble always and gentle, and patient too. Be forbearing with one another and charitable. Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives. There is one body and one Spirit, as there is also one hope held out in God's call to you; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Here is a Word of God for all of those who seem to be working overtime to undermine and tear down and disrupt the unity of the Church with their petty

jealousies and bickering, backbiting and quarreling, false pride and prejudices. Here is a Word of God for those heresy hunters who with smooth speech and slick words - in the name of orthodoxy and the truth - are circularizing ~~our Synod~~ the Church with their private publications disturbing the consciences of honest pastors and laymen alike who are concerned about doing the right thing. Defaming the good names of ~~the officials of our church body~~ synodical officials, bolding accusing the teachers and professors at our school and seminaries of false doctrine and heresy, they are succeeding in causing divisions & offenses within the church. I'm not asking you to pass judgment on the correctness of their observations. I'm asking you to listen to these words of St. Paul: Be humble always and gentle, and patient too. Be forbearing with one another and charitable. Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives.

Let's get one thing straight - there will always be error in the church militant. There will be error because this side of eternity the church consists of fallable people - even church officials and seminary professors. Let's be honest about it and repent of it wherever and whenever it is found. There is error - otherwise we would never need to pray: Hallowed be Thy Name! - Otherwise we would not need the admonition which St. Paul gives us in our text. There is a big difference, however, between error and heresy. Heresy is that which negates or stops or prevents God's redemptive action. God's redemptive activity is God's own self-giving - and it is that which makes the Church. God gives Himself in the Gospel and the Sacraments. We preach Christ Crucified...I am determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified... God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. This is the Gospel, and this is the unity which the Spirit gives - faith in Christ. No one can confess Jesus as Lord except by the Holy Spirit...Now, said Paul, that you have faith in Christ, you are sons of God; all of you baptized into Christ have put on the family likeness of Christ. Gone is the distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and free man, male and female - you are all one in Christ Jesus! Faith in Christ unites. Focused on Christ, and on Christ alone, faith in Christ unites. This is the way it is.

So when the same apostle says, Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine you have learned, and avoid them - the word doctrine there means nothing else and nothing less than the Gospel - God's redemptive activity.

So Article VII of the Augsburg Confession declares: It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian Church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine word. And that is why Luther could say that God was redemptively active all through the papacy. For there was at least Baptism, and the reading of the Gospels on Sunday, and the Cross, and the body and blood of Christ (even though only the body was administered to the laity), and the Lord's prayer, and the Creed, etc. And then you stumble across the strange phenomena in Article 28, where the reformers are willing to continue living as evangelical Christians under the papal bishops. They would even continue living under the pope himself. They are not trying to start a new organizations at all. They ask only one thing - that the bishops let the Gospel be preached and the sacraments administered. When the papal bishops began to murder and execute these preachers of the Gospel, the break came. Luther's real fury, in a sense, was directed at the Left Wingers, the fanatics, the so-called Schwaermer and the reformed. Why? Because Luther felt sincerely that Zwingli's humanism was going to eliminate God's action in Baptism and the Lord's Supper and eventually eliminate God's action altogether.

Imagine, if you will, a bicycle wheel with Christ at the center. The spokes represent the various traditions that have arisen in Christendom for the last 2000 years. The farther you get out on those spokes, the farther you are from the hub and also the farther from the other spokes of the wheel. Theology has its place in the life of the church, but it was never intended to take people farther away from Christ or farther away from other Christians. A spoke has value in a wheel only because it is attached to the hub. Move down the spoke to the hub and it brings you to where the action is. The closer a man is to Christ the closer he is to the hub of life, and the closer he is to all others who are close to Christ.

Let your first loyalty be to Christ. Denominational loyalty is commend-

able, but Christ commanded us to confess Him and to witness to Him. When Lutherans first started using his name, Martin Luther remarked: I did not die for anyone. Christ died for us; He commands our highest loyalty. Offer gentle but firm testimony to your faith in Christ. To witness to Christ, you must be on speaking terms with the world as you are on speaking terms with Christ. Christ asked us to witness to our faith, not to argue about it or to fight about it. The Cross of Christ is sufficient offense to the world without offering additional offense through our own ill-considered words and actions. It is not our business to win an argument, but to be witnesses for our Savior. Show love to Christians of other denominations, even though you may feel strongly - and possibly even correctly - that they do not have as fine an understanding of the Gospel as you do. Talk about your fellow Christians in other denominations with kindness and respect. Put your faith into practice, remembering that there are others who believe in Christ and are sincerely endeavoring to put their faith into practice. Above all, pray for the true unity which only the Spirit of God can give. Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives. And to that kind of behavior and praying I should like to add, and ask you to add with me: AMEN. Let it be so.