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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/29/2017, the Fourth Wednesday in Lent

PRAYER OF THE DAY (FOR LENT 4)

God of all mercy, by your power to heal and to forgive, graciously cleanse us from all sin and make us strong; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

SCRIPTURE..... Ephesians 4:1-6, RSV

¹I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

HYMN 359

In Christ There Is No East or West

MCKEE

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In these midweek Lent sessions, we are taking a look at the 1999 ecumenical statement called “Joint Declaration on Justification.” It is a substantial step forward in mending the sixteenth century breach of the church.

What I want to do this evening is to talk about a happy subject: the unity of the church. It was of this that we just sang in our hymn “In Christ There Is No East or West.” In Christ, there is no division between Christians. Rather, there is, as the hymn puts it:

But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide world.

So, this evening we are going to remind ourselves why we bother with ecumenical agreements like the Joint Declaration. Why do the separated churches work so hard to try to regain unity? In speaking of unity, I do not necessarily mean what is called “institutional unity,” but rather “unity in holy things.” That is, the unity Lutherans seek with the Catholic Church is not so

much that we should be absorbed into the Catholic Church and thereby cease to be the Lutheran Church. Rather, what we hope and pray for is that the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church will achieve “unity in holy things.” That means that we will be welcomed at each other’s Communion Tables and our pastors will be recognized as true pastors by each other. No longer, then, will husbands and wives – one of whom is Catholic and the other Lutheran – be separated at the Lord’s Supper. We are aiming for unity in holy things.

So, the particular paragraph in the Joint Declaration I want to lift up this evening is a paragraph that refers to the condemnations of the sixteenth century. Back then, Catholics and Lutherans hurled condemnations at each other. But now, after five hundred years, we want to draw closer to one another anyway. Here is that paragraph – paragraph 7:

7. Like the dialogues themselves [the ecumenical dialogues and reports leading up to the JD], this Joint Declaration rests on the conviction that in overcoming the earlier controversial questions and doctrinal condemnations, the churches neither take the condemnations lightly nor do they disavow their own past. On the contrary, this Declaration is shaped by the conviction that in their respective histories our churches have come to new insights. Developments have taken place which not only make possible, *but also require* the churches to examine the divisive questions and condemnations and see them in a new light.

I have emphasized the tone of necessity in this paragraph:

... *but also require* the churches to examine the divisive questions and condemnations and see them in a new light.

It is as if from the JD’s point of view, we have no option here. If we do not re-examine our divisions, then we will disappoint our Lord Jesus. We will be in a state of disobedience.

Let me give you some concrete examples – one from the Catholic side condemning the Lutherans, and one from the Lutheran side condemning the Catholics. We will begin with a Catholic condemnation. This one is from the Papal Bull *Exsurge Domine* – the Catholic document appealing to Martin Luther to repent and threatening him with excommunication if he did not.

Before I read my passage from that document, let me mention how dramatic it is to be subject of a *papal* bull. I mean, as I understand it, many ecclesiastic authorities are capable of excommunicating people, including bishops and archbishops and so on. But to be excommunicated by the Pope is

an extraordinary thing. It would hurt my feelings. The Council of Trent also includes condemnations aimed at Lutherans, but those condemnations are directed not at particular people, but rather at positions. But *Exsurge Domine* is addressed to a particular person, Martin Luther, and his followers. Here is a passage from that famous document. Pope Leo X writes this:

As far as Martin himself is concerned, O good God, what have we overlooked or not done? What fatherly charity have we omitted that we might call him back from such errors? For after we had cited him, wishing to deal more kindly with him, we urged him through various conferences with our legate and through our personal letters to abandon these errors. We have even offered him safe conduct and the money necessary for the journey urging him to come without fear or any misgivings, which perfect charity should cast out, and to talk not secretly but openly and face to face after the example of our Savior and the Apostle Paul. If he had done this, we are certain he would have changed in heart, and he would have recognized his errors...

[Then Pope Leo gives Luther another sixty days to repent, followed by this passage:]

If, however, this Martin, his supporters, adherents and accomplices, much to our regret, should stubbornly not comply with the mentioned stipulations within the mentioned period, we shall, following the teaching of the holy Apostle Paul, who teaches us to avoid a heretic after having admonished him for a first and a second time, condemn this Martin, his supporters, adherents and accomplices as barren vines which are not in Christ, preaching an offensive doctrine contrary to the Christian faith and offend the divine majesty, to the damage and shame of the entire Christian Church, and diminish the keys of the Church as stubborn and public heretics.

That phrase “his supporters, adherents and accomplices” includes, alas, us -- you and me, I do believe.

So, that was from the Catholic side – the Papal Bull *Exsurge Domine*, published June 15, 1520.

Then, from the Lutheran side, let me give you an example from Martin Luther’s *Smalcald Articles* of 1537. The *Smalcald Articles* are part of the *Book of Concord* and so represent the official confessional stance of us Lutherans. In this passage, Luther is talking about Catholic practice back then of distributing the Blessed Sacrament in “one kind” – that is, the practice of distributing both the bread and the wine to the priests, but only the bread to the laypeople. Luther writes this:

Especially do we condemn and curse in God's name those who not only allow distribution of both kinds to be omitted but also dictatorially prohibit, condemn, and slander the distribution of both kinds as heresy. Thereby they set themselves against and above Christ, our Lord and God, etc. (*Smalcald Articles, Part III Concerning the Sacrament of the Altar*)¹

And so it is that the Catholics and the Lutherans leveled various condemnations against one another back in the sixteenth century.

Now, our modern document, the JD, says that we must reconsider these condemnations. There is a tone of necessity. The modern document does not want to deny the past:

the churches neither take the condemnations lightly nor do they disavow their own past...

So, the JD does not somehow do away with the disagreements and condemnations of the past, but does ask us to see whether we can look at them in a new light – a more charitable light.

Why? Why bother? Why cannot we rest content with a fractured church. “You go your way and I’ll go mine.” Why can’t we be satisfied with that?

The answer is that *we* cannot be satisfied with a fractured church because *Jesus* is not satisfied with it.

The classic text for this is John 17 – from the “high priestly prayer” of Jesus for the church:

²⁰I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, ²¹that they *may all be one*; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. (John 17:20-21, RSV)

The child-like instinct of ecumenical theology is that it is good to obey Jesus. If the Lord of the church prays that we should be one, we should not want to be fractured.

And so we return to this evening's Bible text – the one from Ephesians 4. St. Paul urges us to be a peaceable people, “forbearing one another in love,

¹ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (pp. 320–321). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The JD tries to live in harmony with the Bible’s teaching that there should be one church:

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

And to this one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father of us all be the glory, now and forever. Amen.