

Walking and Talking Together as One in Christ

In the name of him who bids us, "Follow me"; dear friends in Christ. In this morning's Gospel, we hear about Jesus calling his first four disciples. They are fishermen, plying their trade on the Sea of Galilee. One minute they're doing what they always do. Then up steps Jesus and he says, "Follow me". And without hesitation they drop what they're doing, get up, and go with him. It's really quite remarkable. It makes us wonder how they could do that – just leave everything behind and go. It causes us to ask, "Would I be willing to do that; forsake it all and follow Jesus?" But the thing to see is that it has nothing to do with the faithfulness of the men Jesus called or their high level of spiritual receptivity. No, what's being emphasized is the power of Jesus' Word. He who causes demons to flee, the lame to walk, and the dead to rise by the power of his voice, also calls resistant, rebellious sinners to leave their former way of life and through his spoken Word he gives them the strength and will to do it. The same thing happened to us. We aren't followers of Jesus because of any inherent virtues we possess. Quite the contrary, we follow him because in his mercy he called us by his powerful Gospel and through it he gave us the ability to believe and to respond in a positive way. It's Jesus and the power of his Word that makes us his disciples.

And you are his disciple – called individually by Jesus into a personal relationship with him just like those original disciples. And when he called you, he became your Savior, your teacher, and your Lord. And as a disciple of Jesus you have two basic tasks. First, to continue to listen to Jesus, since he's the teacher and you're the disciple and it's by listening to him that you grow and mature in discipleship. And second, it's your mission to love everyone else: all people; but especially those who also have been called by Jesus into discipleship. You see, though he called you as an individual, he doesn't leave you on our own. Your relationship to Jesus isn't a private party, just him and you. No, he called you into God's family, the assembly of saints, the fellowship of his disciples, the holy Christian Church. You might think that the people to whom you are most closely related are what you call your blood relatives; but that's not right. Your closest relationships are with the people with whom you share the blood of Christ. When you were baptized, you were united into Jesus' body and made one with him and with everyone else who is baptized in him. And just as Jesus loved us and gave himself for us, we are to love and give ourselves in humble service for each another.

And that is unquestionably the hardest thing about being a disciple of Jesus. I mean, we get along with Jesus all right. After all, he's perfect. And we're the big winners in the relationship. He lives for us, he dies for us, he rises for us; he forgives our sin and declares us righteous (even though we're not). And he grants us salvation. It's a great deal for us. So we like Christ just fine. It's other Christians we don't like so much. We have a harder time with them. Why? It's because they're sinners just like we are. They're full of pride and self righteousness and selfishness and unholy lusts and passions just like you and me. Of course, because we're sinners, the perception is always that they've got it worse than me.

We see this with the original disciples of Jesus. Time and again we find them arguing among themselves about which one of them is the greatest. And each one's favorite candidate is invariably himself. "I'm the greatest." They can see each other's faults so much better than their own, and each one imagines his own goodness to be much greater. And Jesus rebukes them for such behavior. "Stop thinking in worldly ways. Stop striving to be first. Let the greatest among you be the one who makes himself the least and the slave of the rest." It's a tough lesson to learn. And what makes it so hard is the selfish, prideful sin in our hearts – sin that we must constantly be on guard against and confess and repent of when we see it – both for ourselves as individuals, and when it rears its ugly head in groups of us collectively.

Oh, yes; it can do that. That's what was going on at the church in Corinth, which we heard about in this morning's Epistle. It was a congregation coming apart at the seams. It was deeply divided over a number of issues, and there were various factions within the church struggling for control and to have their pet agenda items given highest priority. (Nothing like that ever happens in the church today, does it?) In any case, in this battle for supremacy, each faction was attempting to "pull rank" on the others in order to claim preeminence for themselves. And the way they did this was to claim special status because of their respective allegiances to certain pastors and evangelists who had served the congregation in its brief history.

You see, the Church at Corinth was fairly young. St. Paul had started it only six years before he wrote this letter to them. Back then he had spent eighteen months there preaching, teaching, and organizing the congregation from scratch. After Paul left to continue his missionary work elsewhere, a man named Apollos served as the theologian in residence at Corinth. We know that he wasn't quite as well grounded as Paul in the Christian interpretation of the Scriptures; but on the other hand, he was a much better public speaker than Paul, so he was quite popular. Sometime later it seems that Cephas, known better to us as Peter, came to the city for a while. It's doubtful that he served as the pastor; but he certainly would have had opportunities to preach and teach being, as he was, quite a celebrity in the early church. And all the while the church was growing. The members were, for the most part, adult converts to Christianity. And they got it into their heads that they earned status in the congregation's pecking order based upon which of these men who had served the church in the past they claimed as *their own* special teacher.

So when they had their arguments about things pertaining to the customs and business of the church, they tried trumping each other by saying things like, "Look, we know what we're talking about. We're the originals. Our founder, Paul himself, instructed us." To which another group might reply, "So what? Paul was a boring preacher, and way too technical to understand. We were baptized by Apollos. Now, there's a great man. You should listen to us." Then someone else might say, "Well, we're new, of course; but Peter, the Lord's right-hand man, baptized us. He walked on water. Remember? Your guys never did that." And there was still another group that tried to beat everyone out by saying, "Forget about those mere mortals you claim, we follow Christ." And please understand that while the argument of that last group sounds good; they were just another self-seeking faction using the name of Christ to their advantage.

Paul, having heard of their constant squabbling, writes to the church appealing for unity among its members. He says, "I exhort you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you may all speak the same thing, and that there be no schism among you, and that you may be restored in the same mind and in the same purpose." What Paul is doing is reminding them of their essential unity in Christ Jesus. It's *Jesus'* name into which they were baptized. It is *his* Gospel of salvation that they confess together – and it didn't make a lick of difference who they claimed as their teacher or patron saint.

He goes on to say that now he's glad he didn't baptize many of them for fear that some would be claiming special status for that. "Was I crucified for you?" he asks sarcastically. The obvious answer is "no". We are all baptized into Christ – into his death, burial, and resurrection. We became children of the same Heavenly Father through him, he sent us all the same Holy Spirit to give us faith, and we are one as we confess his name together. The teacher does not matter; what matters is the cross of Christ that is being taught. So it's ridiculous to imagine that some Christians are superior in some way to others because of the name of their teacher. Such meaningless and artificial distinctions should not be tearing a church apart.

Now, all that should be pretty straightforward. Paul wants the church to be united. Don't we all? But unfortunately, these words of Paul are often misused by well-intentioned people who think that there is *never* a valid reason for having divisions in the church. They would extend Paul's exhortation to unity to cover differences in methods of biblical interpretation, differences in doctrine, differences in understanding what is and what is not a sin, and so on. These people say that since we are all one in Christ, it's not only the name of the teacher that does not matter, but also the very content of the church's message that's not important.

The problem here is that it *is the content of the church's message* that *makes us one*. It's the Gospel itself – the message of Jesus' cross and resurrection – that unites us. It's by believing in the same message that we are saved. Walking together in Christ means when we talk about Jesus we say the same thing. It's confessing together the same faith, the same Christ, that makes us part of his body. When someone or some group isn't saying the same thing about Jesus, we have no choice but to be divided from them. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

Not too long ago, I read a letter from a man who had just moved with his family into a major metropolitan area in Texas. He was an LCMS member and was hoping to find a new church home. The first Sunday he tried the closest LCMS congregation and was not at all comfortable with their approach to worship. I'll not go into details; suffice it to say that he was looking for something more traditional and didn't find it. So, because the next closest LCMS church was fairly distant, he thought he'd try another nearby Lutheran church that is not in fellowship with the LCMS. He was initially delighted with what he found. The congregation was friendly, the atmosphere was reverent, the church looked like a church instead of a theater in a warehouse. They sang real hymns instead of camp songs and had readings from Scripture. This, he thought, was exactly what he was looking for.

Then the pastor got up to preach. The text was the one we heard about a month ago, from Matthew's Gospel, where he writes of the angel telling Joseph to take Mary as his wife – that her child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The pastor's sermon turned out to be a scathing attack on those absurd religious fundamentalists who are so blind and stupid as to actually believe in the virgin birth of Christ. He explained how the early Christians lacked the words to properly express their devotion to Jesus, and how they created the myth of the virgin birth to set Jesus on a higher level than the rest of us. And then he returned to attacking those unloving, fanatic "Taliban Lutherans" who are so dumb as not to see the myth for what it is. So the writer of the letter is sitting there in the pew listening in horror as the pastor tears down this basic Christian truth, hoping that this is some kind of rhetorical set up, and that sooner or later the preacher is going to set things straight. When he realizes it isn't going to happen, he looks at his family and thinks about the damage that may be done to them by hearing this – and the look his wife gives him tells him that she came to this same conclusion several minutes earlier; so they get up to leave. And, at least the way he explained it, it was more of a quiet slipping out of the side than a stomping out in righteous indignation. What was the congregation's response? *They laughed at them.*

And here I hope you see that this division in the church, this family getting up to leave in the face of this attack on their faith, was entirely appropriate. I hope you see too that it would be impossible for any of us to claim spiritual unity with people who believed what that pastor was saying. Why? Because we would not be talking about the same Jesus. *We* would be speaking of God's only-begotten Son who took on human flesh to save sinners, and they would be speaking of a very nice man who taught people to love each other, and who got himself killed because he bucked the system. So for the sake of preserving the truth that makes us one in Christ, there must be divisions in the church. We cannot walk together in Christ with people who do not know who he is or who deny what he did to save us. And to extend Paul's appeal

for unity across the gaping chasm that divides truth and error is to completely misunderstand what he's saying.

What is he saying then? Well, let's understand that Paul is talking to people who do share a common confession of Christ. They say the same things about him. But even among people who confess Jesus Christ and his Gospel, there are disputes. Some of these disputes are caused purely by the sin of those who are involved, and other disputes are legitimate differences in opinion – but even these are almost always inflamed and aggravated by sins of the people involved. And so congregations experience civil wars (or should we call them uncivil wars?) about what color hymn book they use, what time the worship service should be, whether the wine in Holy Communion should be served in individual or common cups. They divide over which of many worthy mission projects they should support.

None of these things has anything to do with matters of doctrine. They do not bear on Church's confession of Christ. But nevertheless they are being allowed to rip the body of Christ apart. It happens when we get wrapped up in inconsequential things and refuse to put them in proper perspective. Be it pride or stubbornness, we don't want to lose any ground. And when we run into opposition there is bound to be perceived slights and insults. These cause sore feelings. And these get spread and expanded by gossip and rumors. Soon there's name-calling; and somehow it happens that everyone feels they can read the minds of others. Not only do we know others' hidden motives, we can actually know what they're thinking and what they're going to say before they say it.

It's this sort of infighting and schism that Paul is addressing when he says, "In the name of Jesus, let all of you speak the same thing, and let there be no divisions among you." And it happens that in saying it that way, he tells us how to do it: by saying the same thing – that is, by going to our common confession of Christ. That's the basis of our unity – and it's also the key to solving our disputes. How? Because our common confession begins with recognition of our own sin. That's why on a typical Sunday we begin worship by examining our own faults. And one of the sins we all need to confess, especially when we are involved in one of these inner church battles, is the hypocrisy of standing here confessing "I a poor miserable sinner" while at the same time thinking, "Chief of sinners though I be, so and so is worse than me." If we can get to that point, then we can really make some progress in solving our disputes; because then it's that we can see how truly rotten our hearts are, and how much we need to be forgiven and cleansed. And again, it's our common confession that comes to the rescue when we say together, "born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day he rose again from the dead." That's the Gospel. That's the power of the cross to forgive sins and change sinful minds and hearts. And then we apply it to the whole congregation when we say together, "I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the *communion* of saints, the forgiveness of sins ...". That's the power of the Gospel working in your life that brings peace and harmony between you and others. And I'm convinced that if we made it a habit of going to what we say together more often, we would put things in proper perspective, and we wouldn't have so many divisive disputes in the church.

Today our Lord Jesus calls us to follow him, and through the apostle Paul we learn that walking together behind the Lord means that we talk together confessing the same truth about him. So let's do that now. I invite the congregation to rise and turn with me to page 322 of the hymnal, and in the words of the Small Catechism (Apostles' Creed and explanation) let's confess the saving faith we share.

Soli Deo Gloria!