

# Trinity Church (ELCA)

Stephens City, Virginia

## Sunday's Sermon

May 8, 2016

The Rev. Mr. Cameron P. Keyser

Easter 7-C

A group of new arrivals in Heaven met Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. He started with a tour - pointing out areas of interest and filling them in on the rules of the Kingdom. They entered a building with door like classroom doors on either side. They peered into the window of first door and there was an intense prayer meeting going on - "Those are the Presbyterians," St. Peter said. "They spend all their days giving thanks to God for having pre-destined them to be here..."

In the second room was a huge cocktail party: a big band playing in the back, top shelf liquor, Godiva chocolates in trays, peanuts, bacon-wrapped scallops - they were having an enormously good time.

"Those," St. Peter smiled, "are the Episcopalians and they're so glad to be here they just can't stop partying."

As they moved down the hall, St. Peter whispered: You gotta' be real *quiet* when you pass this door - because those are the *Lutherans*, and *they* think they're the only ones here."

"...that they may all be one," Jesus prayed this morning. "As you, father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us - so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

As Windex bottle-wielding family patriarch "Gus Portocalas [Por-TOKE- a- los] says in the movie "My Big, Fat Greek Wedding: "And, so there, you *have* it:" Jesus' deepest wish for us - his disciples: that we would be one as he and God are one.

Unfortunately, all I can say to that is "fat chance!" Try turning on the TV some Sunday morning you're not able to join us here, or - during the week - listen to one of the billions of "Christian" radio stations on the air - and do a little "channel - surfing:" you'll meet the 'Yelling Jesus' - with the preacher who's yelling, too! "Jeeeeeee-zus...yha!"...the Jesus with fire in his eyes...the "kinder, gentler" Jesus - who, still points a bony finger and says "Straighten-up, or I'll send you to Hell..."

There'll be the Jesus who wants you to order your free prayer shawl - which he actually wore on the

road to Emmaus - if only you'll send a minimum "prayer gift" of only \$39.95..."

I guarantee you, within minutes, you'll see and hear so many *different* Jesus', you'll wanna' scream: "Will the *real* Jesus please stand up?"

So, with so many "incarnations" of this Jesus of Nazareth, how can we ever even begin to buck up to the hope "that all may be one?" With the former Pope who declared that all non-Roman Catholic Ordinations weren't valid on *this* end of the spectrum, and Wisconsin Synod and Lutheran Church Missouri Synod who won't even *commune* at the same table with the ELCA on the *other* - what are the chances? In between are the Southern Baptists who won't recognize infant baptism - I guess God doesn't get it "right" the first time, so they have to do it for him...the Pentecostals who claim that faith isn't real if you don't speak in tongues or "test" your faith by surviving the bite from a venomous snake that you're handling, or the Mormons who have some kind of weird "heierarchy" in heaven and believe a person can still be baptized after they die...

It's no wonder that most of the artistic representations thru the ages show a somber, sad-sack - almost clinically depressed - Jesus with droopy eyes and a sort of defeatist look on his face. *I* would be, too.

The motto of the Moravian Church reads: "In *essentials* - unity; in non-essentials, *liberty*; in *all* things, charity." the *Lutheran* take on that is: 'Faith alone, Scripture alone, Grace alone.' But, *see?*: even *Lutherans* who have a long, long-standing reputation for finding 'concord' within the Church: that is, honoring those things on which we agree rather than fixating on those which we don't - can't just say, "Well, that's pretty good, Moravians...let's go with it!" without having to add our own peculiar punctuation - even when the slogan comes from a German *Lutheran* theologian of the early 17th century: Rupertus Meldenius.

[Ru-PER-tus mel-DEEN-e-us.] We can't even agree with one of our own!

So, what might we find if we explored those 10 little words: “In essentials, unity; In non-essentials, liberty; In all things, charity?” Well, first, we’d probably begin by disagreeing on what’s ‘essential’ and what’s not: baptism by immersion – or sprinkling? And for infants as a means of Grace, or only for adults who claim to “believe?”...grape juice or wine for Communion...the “Real Presence” at the Eucharist – or just a memorial? We’ve spent *centuries* on those debates alone and have yet to find common ground...We can’t even agree on the colors of the church year!

Baptism, I guess, *could* be the ‘bottom line’ for what is and what isn’t essential for Christian unity – but, that would leave out the Quakers who believe that *all* of life is a sacrament – not just a single action...and *include* that screwy Mormon stuff.

All this may sound like much ado about nothing: something of interest only to theological ‘egg-heads’ in ivory towers – or of those who try to count ‘how many angels you can get on the head of a pin’ – but, it’s really not. It’s the kind of crap that single-handedly gives Christianity such a bad public image, and the primary reason that we’re driving folks away from the church – *any* church – in droves. *We’re doing it ourselves!* Jesus says plainly this morning that unity is vital “so that the world may believe..”

The next thing we’d probably wanna’ debate is the notion of ‘charity:’ what *is* it, who *deserves* it, and how much are we gonna’ *spend* on it? Is the amount of our ‘charity’ based on our gross income, or net? If – and that’s a big ‘if’ – it’s supposed to be 10%: is that just to the *church* or can I count my Red Cross and United Way and Disabled American Veterans contributions? Looks to me like, once again - as on the cross – Jesus is gonna’ have to do for us what we could – but won’t - do for ourselves.

I’ll admit: I’m as bad as the rest in perpetrating this whole ‘disunity’ thing when I rant and rave about those TV charlatans who call themselves “evanglists.” But, on the other hand, I seem to be the one lone voice in our local ministerium promoting that we extend an invitation to the local Unitarian/Universalist clergy to join us. They were excluded several years ago by just this kind of “pigeon-holing” when the one pastor refused to let the Unitarian pastor preach from ‘his’ pulpit for the annual round-robin *Community* Thanksgiving service because Unitarians are not exclusively ‘Trinitarian:’ by that, he meant that some Unitarians don’t believe that the concept of the Trinity: one God in 3 forms, is an absolute necessity in defining what it means to be a Christian.

So? I’ll bet there are some here who don’t understand the doctrine of the “Real Presence” in the Eucharist. Raise your hands. *Mine* is up. None of us have any first-person knowledge of the resurrection or of the risen Christ’s Ascension – which was observed this past Thursday. We never saw a Jesus “miracle” or heard the sound of the nails crushing his bones...yet, we still call *ourselves* ‘Christians...’

*“Divisions in the faith need not be a defeat, so long as we don’t allow them to destroy our love and welcome for one another in Christ. If we allow our divisions to become breaches: of love, and occasions for pride and rivalry instead of bridges over which we can walk together – then we will have failed in our calling, and our witness for Christ will be marred.”*

So what *is* the ‘essence’ of this Christian ‘unity’ Jesus calls us to this morning? If salvation comes to us by faith in Christ, there must be some defining core of truth sufficient to unite us - even if it’s not yet complete in all its detail. And, *I* think it’s found in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13: one of the most powerful passages in all of literature – ‘religious’ or not...a passage that we’ve heard so many times that we’re numb to it’s very real implications: we let the beauty of the words get in the way of the depth of its meaning. So, in a feeble attempt to make it a little clearer – with deepest apologies to the apostle Paul, I’ve had the audacity to put it in my own words - and, here they are:

“If I was able to speak eloquently like some people, or even divinely like an angel – but didn’t have love, what I would say would be worth nothing more than the sound of a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I had the powers of a prophet - and understood all of life’s mysteries, and if I were smart enough to - literally – know everything there is to know; and if I had faith so strong I could move mountains with it, but didn’t have love, all of that would be absolutely worthless.

If I were bold enough to give away everything I own, or brave enough to sacrifice even my life for some noble cause – which, of course, would *impress* a lot of people – but, didn’t have love, I would gain nothing. Love is patient and kind. It’s not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love never demands to get its own way; and, it’s not irritable or resentful, either. Love celebrates the truth...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

All that other stuff: prophecies, and tongues, and knowledge: you know as well as *I* do that it’s all gonna’ end some day. and, you realize, too, that - being human – even tho’ we try not to admit it: we really don’t know all that much about what life is truly all about. For the

time-being, what we see – about life, about faith – even about God - is like looking in a mirror: it's very dim and sometimes even distorted. the things we know now, we know only in part. but, after God finishes all he's planning for us, we will see face to face, and we will know fully - even as we are already fully known by God.

Right now, we have 3 things to get us thru life: faith, hope, and love - these three. and the greatest of these is love..."

Love *not* as an emotion, but as a conscious act of our *will*: loving others not necessarily because we '*like*' them, but out of the gift of *Christ's* Love for us – despite the roundly imperfect souls that we are.

Two popular hymns come to mind to bring those words to life: "We all are one in mission; we all are one in call – our varied gifts united by Christ, the Lord of all.

A single great Commission compels us from above: to plan and work together that all may know Christ's Love."

And another – if you know it, sing it with me: "We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord we are one in the Spirit; we are one in the lord- and we pray that our unity may one day be restored - and they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; yeah, they'll know we are Christians by our love

We will work with each other; we will work side by side; we will work with each other; we will work side by side - and we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride. And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love yeah, they'll know we are Christians by our love, our love."

Yeah - by our *love*. Amen.

### **Sources Consulted**

The Greatest Wonder of All by John M. Braaten

One Body by Ray C. Stedman

[www.songlyrics.com/jars-of-clay/they'll-know-we-are-christians-by-our-love](http://www.songlyrics.com/jars-of-clay/they'll-know-we-are-christians-by-our-love)

*In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity*, Dr. Mark Ross, associate dean and associate professor of Systematic Theology, Erskine Theological Seminary, Columbia, SC – article on line

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