

Sermon for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
for use in congregations and other mission centers of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA  
Sunday, June 2, 2019

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

**John 17:20-26**

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Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in abundance, dear people of God, from God our Creator, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Greetings from your siblings in Christ from across the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, some 50,000 members of more than 180 congregations, campus ministries, camping ministries, social ministries, synodically authorized worshipping communities, and other mission centers. Nearly 600 of them are gathered this morning for worship, fellowship, and the work of God's kingdom at Purdue University on the last day of the 2019 Synod Assembly. Across the miles, we are together in the Spirit and yoked together in mission and ministry. I am grateful for your partnership in the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the life of the world.

Sadly, we engage this partnership in a fractured world. Far too often, the simple fact of being different in some way has come to be defined as wrong, or even evil, and we use it as reason enough for excluding others...from our Facebook feeds, our communities, our congregations, and our lives. Along the way we cloister ourselves into ever-narrowing circles of people who are like us and we do whatever we can to defend our little fortresses of uniformity, mistaking them for havens of unity.

The theologian Miroslav Volf suggests that such exclusion has become one of the primary sins of our time, as it skews our perceptions of reality and causes us to react out of fear and anger toward those who are not like us.

Is it any wonder that our lives grow flat, our spirits shrink, and we wander further and further away from the new, abundant, and lasting life that we thought Jesus had promised?

Thankfully, it is for this world – and for every one of us who live in it – that Jesus prays on his way to the cross. It is for every one of us who succumbs to denying and destroying the foundational unity that God has given us that God raises Jesus from the dead.

*The glory that you have given me I have given to them, Jesus prays to his Father,  
so that they may be one, as we are one,  
I in them and you in me,  
so that they may become completely one,  
so that the world may know that you have sent me  
and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

Jesus prayed that we would be one, as he and the Father are one; completely one.

And he prayed that through this oneness the world would see that God sent Jesus to gather all people and creation into the reconciling love that is God.

In other words, our unity with others is wrapped up in our unity with God. Being united with God through Christ also unites us – whether we like it or not – with all others who belong to God. And Jesus prays that we will live into that reality.

This amazing gift of love that unites us with God and with one another rises from the empty tomb and it becomes ours as we die and rise with Christ in the washing of water and Word. And we are sent from those waters to live into this gift of reconciling love so that our love, our oneness with others – even and especially with those who are most different from us – will reflect the love of the Father for Jesus and the love of Jesus for us.

As it turns out, the persistent, pervasive, reconciling love unleashed and now afoot in the world in the crucified and risen Christ Jesus is made real and revealed through frail, failing human beings like you and me.

The risen Christ is revealed and made real to us and to the world not only as we are reconciled to God and not only as we learn to put up with or tolerate others.

The cross-formed love of God in Christ and the tomb-born new, abundant, and lasting life of Christ is revealed and made real day by day, year by year, as we live into God's gracious embrace of us **AND** take the often dangerous and costly step of opening ourselves to others,

especially to those who are different from us in ways that frighten or confuse us – to enfold them in the very same embrace with which we ourselves have been enfolded and embraced by God.

I experienced the transforming truth of this for the first time the summer after my junior year of college. An organization called “Sports Ambassadors” put together a baseball team that consisted of Christian players from colleges all over the United States. The team travelled throughout Latin America for most of the summer, playing against some of the best amateur baseball players in the world, putting on baseball clinics, and sharing our faith in Christ with anyone who would listen.

The first day of training camp, I realized that I had two things in common with every one of my teammates: love for baseball and the love of Jesus...and that was about it. We came from a wide variety of Christian denominations, some of which I had never heard of. Our theological perspectives were as different as our racial, economic, and social backgrounds. I didn’t even like some of these guys and I thought some of their perspectives and behaviors were not even Christian. I would never have chosen most of them as friends or teammates – much less willingly choose to spend all my time in close quarters and unfamiliar places with them...and I am pretty sure a number of them felt that way about me.

But there we were, after a week of training camp, flying the friendly skies to play baseball and witness to Christ in Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Columbia, each chosen by the same coach to form a team and engage a mission.

We were one, whether we liked it or not.

Over the weeks, we encountered some very rough patches that threatened to undo us. But with the gracious, wise and compassionate guidance of our coach – who would not let us let go of each other or disparage one another and always nudged us closer to each other – an amazing thing happened that none of us could have done on our own: Jesus’ ancient prayer was answered among us.

Our hearts were opened to each other in ways that I didn’t think were possible. We learned to appreciate rather than disparage differences. Over and over again, we were drawn deep into confession, repentance, and forgiveness with each other, embraced together in the self-giving love of God.

By the time I was back home in Minnesota and my teammates were spread again across the country, I had learned that because I am held by Jesus in the love of God, I am also held in that love with everyone else that God loves. Even more, I am called and empowered by the glory of God given to me by Christ to love every person with the same enfolding, embracing love with which God loves me. In this unity which is gift, trust, task, and promise all wrapped up in the death and resurrection of Christ, Jesus is revealed and made real in, among, and through us frail, failing, fragile, fragmented and forgiven human beings.

Living into the oneness, the complete oneness, that God gives us in Christ is hard work, sisters and brothers. It is also holy work. It calls us to let go of prejudices, stereotypes, and dismissiveness and in their place gives us a foretaste of the feast to come where all will sit together with Christ as host and food.

And here's the thing to hold onto along the way:

Jesus prays for us.

Jesus forgives us.

Jesus walks with us.

The love of Jesus will rise among us.

And others will see God in and through us.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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Reference: **Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation** by Miroslav Volf © 2010 (Abingdon Press).