

SERMON TEXT FOR EASTER 7A

PREACHED MAY 28, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: John 17.1-11, Acts 1.6-14; Psalm 68.1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4.12-14, 5.6-11

I'm taking a little survey of our congregation today, so raise your hand if the following statements pertain to you:

- You grew up in Enola
- You were baptized or grew up in a Lutheran church
- You currently work full-time
- You have at least one pet
- You are a fan of the Pittsburgh Steelers
- You plan to or have already eaten a hot dog or hamburger this weekend
- You have served in the military
- You remember where you were when JFK was assassinated?
- You know what time worship begins here next Sunday?
- You know the first and last name of your pastor?
- You love Jesus?

So, as you watched hands go up and down, what becomes clear? (That we don't have much in common!) Is there anything we **do** have in common? Yes, and probably **only** that one thing: **we all love Jesus.**

Now, let me say that Zion is not **unique** in this at all! Oh, some congregations may have a majority of members who grew up in the same **town**, in the same **church**. But that kind of **rootedness** has **waned** as our society has become more **mobile**.

The **other** thing that has changed is the notion that if you **grew up** in that church – or **any** church – you are still **active** in that church as an adult. We know that this notion is false because of the dozens of people who, every year, move from active member to **inactive** member.

And again, this is not something unique to **Zion**, or even to **Lutheran** churches or even to **mainline Protestant** churches. It is happening across the religious map. Statistics tell us **many things** about the Church, but mostly they point to the truth that, **for the majority of Americans, the church is no longer relevant.** Fewer and fewer people have **any** affiliation with a community of faith, and mainline denominations (Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, United Methodists) are shrinking at a rate that calls into question the **future** of these churches.

Worse yet, these statistics gurus tell us that **no one is getting it right.** **Evangelicals** (the more fundamentalist and non-denominational churches) bring people in the **doors** in record numbers, only to watch them **leave** in record

numbers - and **faster** than their mainline counterparts. One in four Americans say that they have **no church affiliation**. These are often referred to as "nones."

These statistics are hard to **hear**, and even harder to **swallow**. The picture they paint is not **affirming** or **positive** or **hopeful**. But what these studies actually **tell** us is less about the **death** of the church and more about the **future** of it. //

Jesus, too, was concerned – **deeply** concerned – about the **future** of his **following** (which, of course, was not yet an organized church). He worried about his **band of weary followers** and whether he had **taught** them enough for them to carry on his legacy. He was deeply concerned about the **push-back** they would receive from those who were **skeptical** or who outright **opposed** Jesus' new teachings.

The time has come for Jesus to say good-bye to his disciples. He knows he can no longer shield them from the cries of the world. Jesus prays that all who follow him may be one: *"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."*

"One hand, one heart" sings lovers Tony and Maria in *West Side Story* - despite the fact that, to their family and friends, they are bitter **enemies**. Can two or more people really be of a single mind, a single heart, a singular purpose? The Three Musketeers' rallying cry was, "One for all and all for one." What is **our** rallying cry? What do we **declare** as Christians, as members of the ELCA, the Lower Susquehanna Synod, as members of Zion?

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul wrote that there is *"one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all."* Many like to say that Christ's Church is one no matter how much **individual** Christians may differ and disagree with each other. **Evangelical** Christians tend to say that all those who confess Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior – those who are "born again" - are united in Him. **Liturgical** Christians (including Lutherans) tend to say that all who are **baptized** in the name of the Triune God are united in Him.

So can we say that, despite our **diversity**, even despite our **theology**, we are **one** if we are united in and through **Christ**? **Is it enough to say that we are one if we confess Jesus Christ as Savior?**

I would answer that question both yes and no. In many respects, Jesus' prayer has **not** been answered. The church has **fragmented** into many denominations and factions, and we can't agree on whether abortions should be legal, homosexuality is a sin, or illegal aliens and refugees should be allowed to stay or even be welcomed into our country. Those are **huge** divides – and all in the name of Jesus Christ.

And yet, in other respects, Jesus' prayer **has** been answered. Christians **work together across denominational lines** in many ways – from sponsoring community **worship services** to financing **relief efforts** for the hungry, the homeless, the poor and those affected by natural disasters. Many denominations have **formal agreements** with one another, embracing our **common beliefs** rather than the things in which we **cannot agree**. And as much as the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's was a step **away** from our oneness as Christians, it was never Luther's intention to do anything but **reform the church structure that already existed**.

"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." Those 12 disciples had **no idea** what was really happening when Jesus prayed this prayer the first time. But brothers and sisters in Christ, **we do**. We know the **whole story**. We get to hear Christ's **hope**, Christ's **call**, Christ's **obedience** to us on **this side** of the cross and the empty tomb, on **this side** of the joy of Easter morning. So let us not worry about the **future**, but instead be filled with **hope** in our **unity** as Christians. As the rallying cry of the United Church of Christ reminds us, "God is still speaking!" What is God saying to **us** this day? AMEN