

“SYNOD SERMON”

John 17.20-26, Easter 7, Yr. C

June 1, 2025

INTRO:

Dear Siblings in Christ, I greet you in the name of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I am Bishop Timothy Graham, called to serve the Indiana-Kentucky Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I bring greetings from all of us in the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, including our Synod staff.

This is our Synod Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, June 1st, 2025.

GREETING

P Alleluia! Christ is risen.

C **Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia!**

P In the name of ✠ the One who was, who is, and who is to come.

C **Amen.**

GOSPEL READING: John 17:20-26

P The Holy Gospel according to St. John, the seventeenth chapter.

C **Glory to you, O Lord!**

[Jesus prayed:] ²⁰ “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. 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. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, 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. ²⁴ Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

²⁵ “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

P This is the gospel of our Lord

C **Praise to you, O Christ!**

SONG

ABIDE WITH ME

I have a home, eternal home
But for now I walk this broken world
You walked it first, You know our pain
But You show hope can rise again up from the grave

CHORUS: Abide with me, abide with me
Don't let me fall, and don't let go
Walk with me and never leave
Ever close, God abide with me

PRAYER

SERMON MANUSCRIPT

What defines a good or great team? Growing up in the '70s and '80s, I observed some iconic super teams. Although I have a deep affection for everything related to Notre Dame, I will focus on professional sports teams. For instance, the Pittsburgh Steelers are my favorite NFL team, terrible towels and all. While the Miami Dolphins had undefeated success before them, the Steelers raised the bar for the NFL with four championships in six years! It felt like they were unbeatable. In the '80s, the San Francisco 49ers also captured four championships. The NBA, which had been struggling, found new life in the '80s, largely due to the dominance of the Magic Johnson-led Los Angeles Lakers, who won five titles, and the Larry Bird-led Boston Celtics, who secured three championships. In the NHL, the New York Islanders, guided by Mike Bossy, and the Edmonton Oilers, steered by Wayne Gretzky, each earned four Stanley Cups, with the Islanders achieving four in a row. Glancing ahead from the '80s into the '90s, the Chicago Bulls' remarkable pair of three-peats is an incredible achievement.

To be clear, there were other great teams before and others that have come since, and we still argue about these things today. But all these championship teams had great coaches, incredible superstars, and many role players. They were the best of the best in their time. But the point is that the unity of these teams was incredible.

- The coaches skillfully managed egos and personalities while discovering strategic ways to leverage each player's strengths for the team.

- Every player was dedicated to their role and the team and respected their coaches and teammates.
- These teams overcame adversity together, whether it originated from within or outside the locker room.
- Ultimately, they trusted one another to play their role in order to win championships.

Exceptional teams demonstrate a remarkable sense of unity and collaboration. It's important to note that great teams don't endure forever; circumstances change. Nonetheless, great teams achieve a cohesion that makes them formidable during their peak. While they may have imperfections and face internal conflicts, they come together as one when they enter the field, rink, or court. These teams appear unified to those watching from the outside despite unseen challenges that could destroy them. As such, great teams consistently find ways to unite and achieve their goals.

In a sense, this is the type of oneness that Jesus prays for the faith community, for the church: that we may be one despite our shortcomings, failures, and prejudices, despite our inability to love and live out the gospel fully.

Our oneness, however, is rooted not in our unity or in ourselves, but in the unity with the Father and the Son, with God and Jesus. This oneness is portrayed as a beautiful expression of God's presence in our world, a testament to God's love. Jesus shares that God is within him, and he is within God. Thus, Jesus hopes and prays for the community of disciples to belong to God and Jesus and to unify just as God is unified, with a longing that they will embody this wonderful unity with God.

Jesus' hope for unity isn't naturally present in the community or the individuals; it springs from the deep connection between the Father and the Son. For the church to truly be "one," it must reflect the beautiful relationship that marks the bond between the Father and the Son. This concept of mutually shared faith shines brightly here. Jesus isn't just focused on each person's connection with him or with the Father; his heart is set on the disciples coming together as a loving assembly of believers.

This precious oneness is a sign of true discipleship in our world. This form of discipleship that stands strong against division becomes a beacon of hope in our often-fragmented world. The call for unity actively counters the tendencies to separate along lines of race, education, socioeconomic status, and gender identity. It's easy to slip into division and to give in to our fears; to the contrary,

fostering real unity is a much greater challenge; it's hard work. How often have we referred to teams and great players as what they could have or should have been, if only they could have been united in a special way? Even within the church, we find various divisions that span denominational, theological, political, and even musical lines. The idea of unity presented here beautifully illustrates the theological basis for our church's identity, which flourishes through the bond between God and Jesus. In a discipleship community or church, individual identity shines best when intertwined with the group identity shared with the Father and the Son.

Moreover, it's really important to recognize that this unity not only boosts and supports the church but also plays a crucial role in its effectiveness in sharing its mission with the world outside. Unity is truly missional! Again, just like the fantastic teams we discussed earlier, where their success and mission to win a championship flourish through their closeness and teamwork, so too is the church's life. The lone difference may be that we don't have to win anything because Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have already won all things for us. Our challenge, our mission, should we choose to accept it (yes, I just saw *Mission: Impossible* ☺), is to live into the power and grace that comes to us from the cross and tomb. Our mission is to walk in this oneness for the sake of the world and to lead others towards faith and understanding in God through Christ, who offers eternal life.

Ultimately, this unity does not arise from shared morals or doctrines but from the deep faith and common purpose to love emphasized in this prayer and throughout the conversation at the Last Supper. It represents a unity meant to be fully completed, rooted in the fulfillment of Jesus' work because God loved the world. Our unity is about serving one another and washing feet, forgiving one another even when they deny, betray, or don't meet the faith standard; loving each other with an extravagant and unthinkable love like God's love, grace, and forgiveness shown through the Son on the cross. This is how the Christian faith has endured. When the church is compelled to love above all else and to trust in God's loving presence and grace, even amid persecution, hardship, and plain human evil, then the church flourishes and embodies the unity that Christ prayed for because love is all that remains.

By this, they will know we are united with Christ! By our love for one another, they will know we follow Christ. Recall how Jesus ends this prayer in v. 26:

²⁶ Father, I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Friends, may God help us trust this unifying love displayed through Christ so that Christ may dwell within us and we in him, like the Father and the Son are one, for the sake of the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.