

Western Iowa Synod Assembly  
May 1, 2010  
Jn. 13:31-35, Rev. 21, Acts 11:1-10

My call says that the “... the bishop will practice leadership in strengthening the unity of this church.”

This is a provision that I have tried, but far from perfect, to dwell in, more intensely than ever since the Churchwide Assembly last summer. It's been like dancing on the heads of snakes. And for good reason, there are those on both sides of the question of inclusivity who are very unhappy. But I keep trying. And today's sermon is once again a call from my heart to yours as congregational leaders, no matter where you are on the spectrum of the question of human sexuality, to, as Paul said, “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:3)

Our lessons are wonderfully suited for those who have ears to hear. From John's gospel... **foretelling** of his coming betrayal, Jesus says, “where I am going you cannot come.” But in my absence, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another...” **This is how everyone will know you are my disciples.**

As Pollyannaish as this may sound considering the tenor of these days, Jesus' **admonition was deadly serious** when we recall from today's gospel that when Jesus spoke these words, he knew precisely where he was going, and the choice he would be faced to make in the days ahead.

That in suffering, in crucifixion, in the brutal death that he would chose, Jesus would glorify God's plan to save his people from their sin. And not only Jews, but says Luke in Acts, but also the Gentiles who had become believers, “for what God has made clean, we must not call profane.”

During Lent, for our weekly worship at the Synod office, we watched excerpts from the movie *Chocolat*. There the diminutive young priest whose sermons had to be previewed by the self appointed town keeper, is now emancipated by the revelation that his keeper is all too human. Now emancipated, he climbs into the pulpit, having cast out

his prepared and previewed Easter sermon, and preaches from the heart: "Today, he said, I want to talk about Christ's humanity, I mean how he lived his life on earth: his kindness, his tolerance. We must measure our goodness, not by what we don't do, what we deny ourselves, what we resist, or who we exclude. Instead, we should measure ourselves by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include."

What the Gospel reveals is that no matter how faithful Jesus is to his Father's mission, he will not be successful in making all those to whom he reaches out to become believers and followers. But he will give everything in the trying, and in so doing, receive the crown of glory.

In the in between time, between death/resurrection and coming again, Jesus calls on his disciples, you and I as followers, to fill the gap. And the way to do that, he says, is to "love one another"..... and in doing so, it will be a powerful witness of God's love to the world.

If you've watched someone knit, you've seen how each stitch is interlocked with every other stitch in such an integral way that if one stitch is dropped, the whole line unravels. That's what Paul means when he says in (1 Cor. 12) that "if one suffers, the whole body suffers."

And so, does this hallmark of interlockedness (if one suffers, the whole body suffers) characterize our behavior with one another?

The spiritual warfare that has characterized the church in many places may seem a proud and gallant gesture of faith. But it seems that the supreme glory **belongs not to those who survive and prevail**, but to those who lay down their lives and never come back. Who so consume themselves in acts of love and forgiveness and reconciliation that they, like Jesus, fully expend themselves.

Is that how others think of us, as those fully willing to expend ourselves in loving one another?

It was in that fully expending himself, that Jesus brought glory to God.

Think with me for a moment. Had God the Father remained aloof from the world in order to retain his mystery and majesty... serene, unmoved, and unhurt by any pain, we might have feared God, we might have respected or admired God, but we would have never loved God. It was in the incarnation, God coming as Savior, and in the Savior's sacrifice on the cross, Jesus emptying himself, that God's love, God's glory, is at its greatest.

In Luke 10:37 Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." And again in Matthew's gospel Jesus says, **you are a city set upon a hill to give light to the world.**

John, thought to be the author of Revelation writes ecstatically of an apocalypses or revelation. He sees the day of Christ's return bringing about a new heaven and a new earth, a time when God will be with his people.....

Tears will be wiped away

Death will be no more

Crying and pain will cease

These words, John says, are trustworthy and true.

A man who took great pride in his lawn found himself with large and recurring crops of dandelions. Although he tried every method he knew to get rid of them, they continued to plague his lawn. Finally, in desperation, he emailed the Extension Service of the Ag department at the University. He explained everything he had tried unsuccessfully, and then asked, "What shall I do now?" Every day he checked his email, hoping for the answer to his problem. Finally the day came when the reply popped into his inbox from the University. The answer was simple and straightforward. The reply simply stated the solution to his dandelion dilemma. It read, "We suggest you learn to love them." Jesus said, "as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Mt. 25:40).

It's clear we have a ways to go before realizing John's dreams of the coming kingdom. That there is much to do, much yet to be accomplished. But the formula for how to do it is no longer a mystery, "Love one another as I have loved you," said Jesus. A love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, a love

manifested in Jesus' invitation to his followers, "take up your cross and follow me." (Lk. 9:23)

In the next moments we will gather around the Lord's table... orthodox and moderate, conservative and not as conservative, those who desire greater inclusivity, and those who believe there are limits. And we hear the words, "the body of Christ given for you." No stipulations. And in that we find our unity, jagged and rough in spots, but **enough for all sinners who stand in need of grace to find unity**. Enough. Christ's body and blood is enough.

**Let us pray:** Lord Jesus, Your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. As your people, help us to find our way in fostering unity, **taking seriously your word that if our brothers and sisters have something against us, we are to leave our gift at the altar, and first be reconciled, and then come to the altar. (Mt.5:25)** Enable us to surrender our haughtiness and a quest for triumph, in order that we may humbly take up our cross and follow you along the pathway of love and reconciliation. Amen.