**First Reading Acts 16: 16-34**

*Those who had enslaved a girl and used her powers to tell fortunes threw Paul and Silas into jail for ordering the spirit to come out of her and consequently ruining their business. In prison, Paul and Silas bring the good news of the gospel to the jailer and his family.*

16 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. 17 While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” 18 She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour. 19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20 When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. Eucharistic Prayer P C P C P C P Blessed are you, O God of the universe…. With this bread and cup we remember our Lord’s passover from death to life as we proclaim the mystery of life. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. O God of resurrection and new life...Grace our table with your presence. Come Holy Spirit. Reveal yourself to us in the breaking of the bread… ...Send us forth burning with justice, peace and love. Come, Holy Spirit. With your holy ones of all times and all places… ...we praise you, O God, blessed Trinity, now and forever. Amen 25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” 29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down

trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31 They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” 32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God

**Psalm 97**

1The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of the isles be glad, 2Clouds and

darkness surround the Lord, righteousness and justice are the foundations of God’s throne. 3Fire goes before the Lord, burning up enemies on every side. 4Lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. 5The mountains melt like wax before the Lord of all the earth. 6The heavens declare your righteousness, O Lord, and all the peoples see your glory. 7Confounded be all who worship carved images and delight in false gods! Bow down before the Lord, all you gods. 8Zion hears and is glad, and the cities of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O Lord. 9For you are the Lord, most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods. 10 You who love the Lord, hate evil! God guards the lives of the saints and rescues them from the hand of the wicked. 11 Light dawns for the righteous, and joy for the honest of heart. 12 Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous, and give thanks to God’s holy name.

**Second Reading Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21**

*The ascended Christ, hidden from our sight, promises to come again. We eagerly pray, “Come, Lord Jesus,” with all who respond to this invitation.*

12 “See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. 16 “It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” 17 The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. 20 The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! 21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

**Gospel John 17: 20-26**

*Jesus prays that the life of his followers will be characterized by an intimate unity of identity with God. To be so identified with God means also to share in God’s mission: to proclaim the word that will bring others into this same unity.*

[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.”

**SERMON**

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

This weekend is the final Sunday in the designated church season of Easter, though we celebrate little Easters every Sunday when we worship. On this 7th Sunday of Easter, we have the final verses of John 17. As I’ve said before, John 13-17 is known as the Farewell Discourse, wherein Jesus is sharing the last teachings before his crucifixion. All of John 17 contains a prayer that Jesus prays on behalf of his disciples. This chapter is broken up over the 3-year lectionary cycle, so we always get a passage from John 17 on the final Sunday of the season of Easter. Today we have the last verses of the chapter, which means they are the last part of Jesus’ prayer. After this, in Chapter 18, Jesus and his disciples set out and the Passion Narrative…the story of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion…begins.

Since these are the final verses of chapter 17 and the final part of Jesus’ prayer, we should be more attentive to that for which Jesus is praying. And the running theme here is Jesus’ prayer that they may all be one. In other words, this prayer is about unity among Jesus’ followers. But that unity has to do with relationship…relationship with God through Jesus and

relationship with one another. Jesus lifts up his unity, his relationship with God as the basis for the unity, the relationship with his followers. It is not, however, just a model to be followed. It is an experience into which Jesus invites all who will believe in him.

Jesus does not claim an exclusive relationship with the Father. Certainly, he has spoken of this relationship frequently as a way to help the disciples know that he isn’t just another man doing all of these things of his own will. Instead, the disciples need to know that Jesus is from God and has come to reveal God to them, to all of humanity. Jesus embodies God and God’s love and grace and compassion for humanity. Yet, as Jesus speaks of his relationship with God, Jesus invites his followers into that relationship with God. He will secure that relationship through his death, resurrection and ascension. But Jesus says it right here in verse 21, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us…” And in verse 22, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one.”

So, this one-ness, this relationship, this unity that Jesus prays for his followers is not unity only with one another. Instead, it is a unity, a relationship with one another and with God through Christ. This concept might seem difficult to grasp so, the visual image I have in my mind is that of Christ with his arms around us bringing us closer to one another. Of course, the practice of unity and relationship isn’t just going around hugging one another in the name of Jesus. It is actually much more complicated than that.

One of the times that this Scripture is used is during ecumenical gatherings. The word “ecumenical” or “ecumenism” refers to the work of encouraging Christian unity across denominations of Christian churches. So during the Week of Prayer For Christian Unity or during a shared worship with Roman Catholics and Lutherans which we’ve done on occasion, this passage from John 17 would be appropriate in reminding us that Jesus’ prayer for all his followers was for unity in relationship with one another grounded in our relationship with God through Christ.

At one such Lutheran/Catholic worship a few years ago, Bishop Laura Barbins, our Northeastern Ohio Synod bishop, in her sermon clarified for us that unity does not mean uniformity. We can be united in viewing one another as siblings in Christ, members of the same family of God, coworkers for the gospel and for the sake of our neighbors in need. That does

not mean that we have to do everything exactly the same, nor believe exactly the same way on every detail of our faith and faith practice. It seems that, when we focus too much on our differences and we don’t try to understand them, this causes problems for our unity as Christians. That is why the ELCA encourages and facilitates dialogues between our church body and others. That is why the Diocese of Youngstown, and our Northeastern Ohio Synod signed a covenant 25 years ago to work on the relationship between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in parishes within our shared territory. Bishop Barbins is currently in the process of reimagining how to engage in ecumenical work and incorporate new, interested individuals, so if you have interest, let me know. Christ’s love and prayers will continue to aid us in improving our relationships with Christians of other denominations.

But Christian unity is not only a challenge for the Christian church across denominations. Our unity is threatened when we look at others as just that… “others.” And I will be specific to Christians here only because Jesus was specifically praying for his followers here. But honestly, the same rules apply when we are relating to those who don’t consider themselves Christian. What does Jesus’ prayer for Christian unity mean to us as we navigate a reality in which…

Christians have different political approaches, Christians come from different cultural backgrounds, Christians legal standing here is complex or questionable but they are great neighbors and friends, Christians are here in the process of seeking asylum, Christians are treated differently because of their language or skin color, Christians are suffering and dying in Gaza, Christians identify as part of the LGBTQ community, Christians are also from the Indigenous community, Christians also happen to be in prison, Christians are turning from the ways of our gracious, loving God.

In the face of ALL of these and other complex challenges, suddenly ecumenism seems like the easier of the 2 problems to address. What does Christian unity look in all of this complexity?

This is a question we all need to carry with us and about which we need to pray. But the first step in the work of Christian unity is seeing ourselves in relationship to those we may view as “other.” We cannot dismiss them, because they are us. We cannot demonize them, because they are us. We cannot possibly think of everybody all the time, but the point is that we cannot dismiss a Christian sibling as a throw-away, as someone undeserving of what one needs to live in safety and thrive. And so, while Christian unity seems like a noble thing, it should also make

us squirm a little, especially at a time when people are being treated as if their lives don’t matter.

Christ is the one who opened his arms wide to the world, while the world nailed him to the cross. And yet, Christ’s arms, with their nail-scarred hands, embrace us all and in doing so, brought us into relationship with God and with one another. Through our sin and through our salvation, we have been drawn into the family of those that God loves. Jesus’ prayer today is that this love enable us to embrace, not necessarily with our arms but certainly with our hearts, those who have been gathered into Christ’s love. Through the love, the care, the concern we demonstrate for one another with our hearts, our hands, our feet, our time, our energy, our resources, the world will know that the love of Christ, the presence of God is here among us now.

Jesus, please pray for us. Risen Christ, work through us. Amen.

**Today, I hope you**

**remember that you**

**are worthy, you**

**matter and you are**

**so loved.**

**not because of all**

**that you do, but**

**simply because of**

**who you are.**