

Advent 2
December 4, 2016

Text: Romans 15:4-13

Theme: May the Christchild Bring us True Unity

1. A unity which gives glory to God
2. A unity which reaches out to others
3. A unity which fills us with spiritual blessings

John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness, pointing to Jesus and calling to repentance. That was the message for all who came to the Jordan to see him and what was going on. Turn from your sins and trust in the one who is coming. And people came from throughout the country to listen and to be baptized. This was a small part of the heritage of which Paul speaks in the text for today, when he says they **were written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.** In an honest evaluation and recognition of our sins, we find reason for despair – emptying ourselves of any vain pride or selfishness and find in Jesus the hope we so desperately need. It is this status that unites us. And so today we say, **May the Christchild Bring us True Unity.**

There are those today who live in ignorance of their sins or their dire consequences. That can serve as a temptation for us because they seem to live lives unencumbered by the guilt of a conscience that confronts them with their failures. But remember how earlier in this letter, Paul highlighted the fact that **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** (*Romans 3:23*) Whether we live in ignorance or suppress that thought as a way of soothing the soul doesn't change the fact. And it's that sort of **unity which gives glory to God.** When we see and understand the Christchild rightly, there is no room for selfishness because we see our deep need for this Savior. Since we must, like those first century Jews, turn to God in repentance and acknowledge our sins how can any of us live with a haughty or holier-than-thou spirit. You and I deserve the very same thing that every other person in the world deserves – death and eternal condemnation. How can we puff ourselves up with pride in ourselves?

Thus Paul urges us, **May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,** ⁶ **so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.** Because we understand who we are as sinners, we treasure the gifts that God gives us when we gather together in worship and join together for Bible Study. Here we express the unified confession not only of our natural sinful condition, but also of God's glorious riches in Jesus and our deep appreciation for his gift of Jesus. God is glorified when we confess his truth together, just as God was glorified by John's testimony, not only because many came to faith, but because John continued to proclaim the truth even when some who came ridiculed him and failed to see their sins or their need for this baptism. That you and I continue to hold to the truth of God's Word and confess it as true in its entirety is a gift of God's grace, and our unity in that gives God glory. That's why it's so critical for us to dedicate ourselves to continuing to hear his Word and study it together whereby we maintain that unity of confession and true faith.

And growing together, we will then work together in **unity to reach out to others** as both John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul did. Look what Paul says, **For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy.** It wasn't only for Jews that Jesus, the Lamb of God, came into the world, but also for the Gentiles that they too may glorify God. Paul, a Jew himself was sent to share with them the good news of God's love that they might know what God has done in Jesus for all people.

What a privilege it was for Paul to carry that message far and wide and to serve God by testifying to his grace and pointing to the incredible change that God works when he brings us from the life of slavery to sin to a life of freedom and service to him. What a privilege also for us to do so as well. It was awesome yesterday to see so many young people join us to invite our community to our service at the Christmas Parade. Their enthusiasm to distribute

our postcards was wonderful. And the adults too to be out there greeting people and sharing the true message of Christmas and the greatest gift ever given. That kind of generational unity is great to see.

There's so much more we can do. So much more we must do to reach those who don't know the joy of Jesus and his forgiveness and peace and the blessing of being united with a family of faith to support them in times of temptation and hardship. In our long range plan 5 years ago, we set out to increase our support for the wider mission of the church so that joining with our brothers and sisters in our synod we can increase the reach of the Word in a world that is clearly lost and floundering. See we are united together not only here at First, but we are also united with nearly 400,000 other Christians to work together jointly to share Jesus. There are two things that can disrupt our efforts to reach out. One is lack of unity of faith in doctrine and the other is unity around the direction of our church. Both of those are energy suckers, stealing our zeal to reach out both corporately and privately. We must continue to work to preserve this unity of faith centered in the Christchild in order that our unity of purpose might also shine forth in our joint work together.

That joint work provides us with tremendous blessings. That God who gives us hope through the Christchild also gives joy and peace. When we understand that we come from different backgrounds, educations, and family traditions, but have been united together in a shared faith in Jesus, that gives us joy. Joy to know that there are others who stand ready to share our burdens. Joy to know that there is productive work to do in Jesus kingdom whether you're closer to birth or closer to death. Joy to know that even our many failures stand sanctified by Jesus' perfect life of obedience and his suffering and death.

And that gives us peace. Because our salvation from the guilt of our sins isn't dependent on how much we do, but on what Jesus has already done. We cannot add to his work. The glory we give to God and the desire to reach out and share that message with others comes from the recognition of the greatness of God's gifts to us which works in us a desire to say thank you to him for his mercy and grace.

John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul weren't that dissimilar in their work. In fact, the work that God gave to them of calling to repentance and faith and uniting around the pure Gospel message is work he continues to entrust to us today. We do it best when we stand united by his Word around a common mission for the common good of each other and the world.