

So, if someone new to our community—say, Joe and Mary Normal, and their children, Susie and Billy—want to go to an ELCA Lutheran Church here in Ankeny, they would have three choices. Or, if those three don't suit, they could consider the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. But maybe that's one's not quite right either, in which case, they could move just a little away from Lutheran theology and consider the Methodist church, or the Episcopal church, or the Presbyterian church or the United Church of Christ, Our Lady Catholic church or any one of several other mainline churches. Still, having visited all those churches, they have still not found a home, so they also visit Prairie Ridge, Ankeny E-Free, First Family and Heartland Assembly of God.

Hmmph, not quite right. Some members of the family like parts of each, but they have not all felt like they have found a home, so here in Ankeny, they could also visit any of 13 church plants currently renting space in our local schools on Sundays.

In fact, it's entirely possible that a person could visit churches every Sunday within the city limits of Ankeny and not go to the same church for well close to three quarters of a year.

And let's not even talk about expanding the Normal's church shopping to the Metro Des Moines area...

In our gospel text today, we hear a lot of talk about the one-ness of the church, and it's hard not to wonder what's happened to us. Because it seems like one-ness has become one-thousand-ness and more. If Jesus is calling us to one-ness, it sure seems like were doing a pretty poor job of it.

In fact, if we look carefully at the text, we hear a lot of “mays.” “That they *may* all be one.” “So that the world *may* believe that you sent me.” “So that they *may* be one, as we are one.” “That they may become completely one, so that the world *may* know that you have sent me...”

It seems, from what we know of English grammar, that when we hear all those “mays,” we’re hearing about something that is not certain to happen. It might happen, it might not. It’s a conditional clause. In English we can identify conditional clauses when we hear the words like, may, could, should, would, might.

So it might seem that Jesus is talking about something that could happen, but might not happen. And when it comes to the oneness of the church, as we look around the world today, we might think it’s a lot closer to not happening...

But let’s look at another verse in John’s gospel that uses the same underlying Greek grammar.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him *may* not perish, but *may* have eternal life.”

I think that when we hear that verse, we don’t hear it as something that might or might not happen. When we hear that verse, we hear the promise in it, and we feel with certainty that this is a promise that God intends to keep.

In fact, if I can go a bit deeper into my grammar lesson here, it turns out that in Greek there are some conditional clauses that carry a meaning that we don’t necessarily have in English.

Some clauses express the purpose of the main verb, “He came to testify to the light, so that all may believe through him.”

Some clauses express the result of the main verb, "...who sinned, this may or his parents, so that he should be born blind?"

But in the Greek used at the time the New Testament was written, there are also clauses that are considered "purpose-result" clauses which means they not only express the purpose of the main verb, but also the result. In other words, the clause expresses both the intention and its certain accomplishment. In scripture, this is a grammatical usage that particularly and distinctively applies to God's actions. Writers, particularly of New Testament books, intend to reflect a theology that says, what God purposes is what happens. Intention for God equals result.

This means when we hear, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him *may* not perish, but *may* have eternal life." We can translate that in our minds to "...will not perish and will have eternal life."

Likewise, hear today's text the way John intended it, "...that they will all be one."

And to go one step farther, John, in his gospel, more than any of the other gospel writers, talks about the promise of Jesus being something that is real for us now—not at some future point, so we can fairly read the text as "...that they are all one."

God intends our oneness and oneness is what results.

Which brings us back to our first concern about the Normal family. Almost a year's worth of different churches, here in the Ankeny city limits. What is it that Jesus means by this oneness that I have just gone to great lengths to show God intends and God has created?

First, it's helpful to realize that Jesus isn't issuing a list of instructions, Jesus is praying. Today's reading comes at the end of a long discussion with the disciples called the final discourse and this last part of it is a prayer that Jesus is praying to God.

So we don't need to hear this text as a to-do list and we don't need to hear it as an indictment of our diverse expression of Christianity. And we don't need to hear it as a call to human achievement or an ideal that we should strive toward.

Instead, we can hear it as Jesus' prayer for us.

How many of you have ever had someone pray with or for you?

I know for me, that's a powerful experience, and a humbling one, for which I find myself extremely grateful. The prayers of others give me strength, and lift me up in the midst of difficult times and carry me through to new places in my life.

This is Jesus praying for us, praying for all of us. So instead of looking for an assignment or our newest to-do list, we can instead rest in his prayer, in thankfulness and gratitude.

Secondly, the unity that Jesus is talking about is not our unity in isolation. It is a unity that is intimately and indestructibly connected to the unity that Jesus has with the Father and that Jesus together with the Father has with us. Jesus prays, "...as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us."

It's a unity that does not begin and end with us, but rather, it *always* begins and ends with God

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Christian unity is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."

Oneness is already in the Father and the son—for our sake. We are blessed to be able to join into that oneness, to live into it and to celebrate within it, with joy and thanksgiving.

Because oneness is not sameness. And unity is not uniformity. We are different people, and we live into and express and share our faith differently—how could it be otherwise? But we can and do have unity in the midst of our diversity in and through Jesus Christ.

So I can celebrate our shared unity in Jesus Christ with my brother the evangelical, and my stepmother the Presbyterian, and my sister-in-law the Methodist and my Aunt the Roman Catholic.

We mark that unity when together we speak the words of both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed, confessing our belief in one God who we experience in three persons and confessing our belief in one holy catholic church. Now when we say catholic in the creeds, we are not saying we are the Roman Catholic with a capital “C” church. Rather, we are saying we are catholic with a small “c”, which means universal, in our expression of church.

To quote Jaroslav Pelikan, a famous historian of our Christian creeds, “The [saying] of the creed is a very important and cherished way of indicating a universality of the faith across not only space but time — to know that in the Philippines this morning, this was the creed that was recited and to know that the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century and my late father and grandfather all affirmed this, all of us together.”

And in the ELCA, we mark the unity that Jesus prays into being through a thoroughgoing ecumenism that includes full-communion relationships with six other

denominations. A full communion relationship means that we have recognized that our agreement runs so deeply that we can share clergy. Additionally, we are regularly in bilateral conversations with six other denominations and we also engage in intra-Lutheran dialogues and interreligious dialogues with a number of other Christian and non-Christian groups.

Jesus prayer for unity does not mean that unity always happens, because we are still a broken people living with one another in a broken world. But what we can hear in Jesus' prayer is that unity is not ours to create. Rather, it is there for us to recognize, celebrate and participate in with and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are all one, because God has made it so.