

Hallelujah! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Hallelujah!

During this Easter season we are focusing on the resurrection of Jesus as creating unity among God's people:

- The **unity of peace** by forgiving one another as we have been forgiven.
- The **Unity of Jesus' agape love**, given through his sacrifice on the cross and in the resurrection
 - And which we receive each week through the word of God and the Lord's Supper.
 - The **unity of discipleship**, together learning from and following the voice of our Master, Jesus in bringing life to the world.
 - the **unity of love toward one another**, particularly those who do not yet believe.
- The **unity of obedience**, as we live and act with Jesus as the center around which we orbit.

Finally, today, we discover unity as the very thing Jesus came to establish in God's people – thing he prayed for, lived for, died for, rose for, and ascended to the Father to generate.

Jesus prayed,

Father, I ask on behalf of all those who will believe in me through the apostolic preaching and teaching, that they may all be one. As you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.

But what does it mean to be “in” someone else?

Physically, there is only one way that is possible – as every mother knows -- and it gives us clues to what Jesus means.

I speak of pregnancy - a baby in the womb.

The baby receives life from both mother and father and receives continued nourishment from the mother.

In the mother, the baby grows, develops abilities – such as kicking and sucking – and then is born to continue growing and living .

The Father and the Holy Spirit give Jesus life in Mary’s womb.

and in the Spirit, Jesus expresses

in human life and voice

who God is.

In the Spirit, Jesus is baptized.

In the Spirit, Jesus overcomes all testing by the devil.

In the Spirit, He heals the sick, casts out demons, raises the dead, and makes the blind to see and the lame to walk.

In the Spirit, Jesus goes to the cross – and there he gives up the Spirit, lets it go, and dies – putting all sin and evil to death with him.

Then in the Spirit, Jesus rises from the dead to life that death cannot end.

Jesus is “in” God the Father as the visible Son who reveals the singular heart and will of God as love that gives life.

And in the Spirit that Jesus and the Father pour out upon us

- first at Pentecost and then when each of us is baptized,
we are granted the way “in” to God through faith in Jesus.

So looking at Jesus as the prototype, if you will

- the firstfruits of the new creation, as the Bible puts it
 - we see what this unity Jesus prays for is all about.

It is the animation of the body of all believers with the Holy Spirit.

So we can say very simply, to be “in” someone else is to share their very life.

To be “in” God is to share the very life of the Father and the Son, Jesus – life that is given through the Holy Spirit.

To be “in” God is for our life to be recognizable as having the Almighty Father as its source and Jesus as its pattern by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As you can hear, talking about this difficult. It is like explaining exactly how it is that a person can walk straight into the ocean from a certain point on the beach, but 30 minutes later, walk straight out again and be at another place on the beach entirely.

But we know the experience. We know it is true.

Everything Jesus did and said in his life was to make visible the love of God that gives us life.

When the church is animated by the Holy Spirit,

the whole Body of Christ makes visible the love of God that gives us life.

And that means that each of us, baptized by water and the Spirit,

is connected to every other Christian in the whole body of Christ and that each of us does our part

so that the whole body is the presence of God.

This is the UNITY OF FAITH.

In the unity of faith, every believer recognizes Jesus in every other believer because we are connected in the one body of Christ.

In the unity of faith, all believers work together to make Jesus known to the unbelieving world.

Consider Paul and Silas in the prison.

Together, with one heart and voice, they were praying and singing hymns to God.

Why were they doing that? Why weren't they anxious and fighting for their rights?

Why weren't they arguing with the guards and insisting on lawyers?

Instead, they were joyful, prayerful, and singing.

They shared the unity of faith.

They were confident that God had their backs – whatever the outcome of the present situation.

Because they were confident, they called upon the Lord publicly, out loud, to show the other prisoners that God is in their midst.

Isn't that what God wants? Doesn't he say "Call upon me in distress, and I will save you?"

- After all, this is what Abraham and Isaac did,
 - What David did when he was in battle
 - What Samuel the prophet did – and what Daniel did in the lions' den.

The unity of faith is powerful – it moves mountains and unlocks prisons and releases those in bondage.

Seeing that power of God at work in the unity of faith, the unbelieving jailer came to trust in the God of Jesus Christ and was baptized to share his life.

The unity of faith in Jesus Christ makes visible among us

the power of the triune God to save the world – one baptism at a time.

Often, churches seeking to grow grasp at the straws of quick fixes

- a new program,

- praise band worship,
- specialized staffing,
- or gimmicks.

And while these things may have value, not a single one will grow the church.

Only baptism into Jesus Christ grows the church.

Only life together as the baptized people of God is eternal.

And baptism is what God does when unbelievers encounter Jesus in their path.

Baptism is what God does when unbelievers encounter the church acting in the unity of faith publicly, making the love of God visible.

Baptism is what God does when unbelievers see the Body of Christ in unity of faith

- worshiping God
- praying to God
- Hearing God's Word
- Learning from Jesus
- Loving the poor and caring for the sick
- Clothing the naked and feeding the hungry
- Seeking justice in the world and speaking up for the oppressed.

It is interesting to note that the decline of the mainline protestant churches in America and Western Europe coincides with certain trends among those who consider themselves believers:

- sporadic or no worship
- Lack of interest in Sunday School or Bible Study
- Disbelieving the Bible
- Pursuit of things money can buy rather than the kingdom of God
- And failure to raise their own children in habits of faith

Good questions for churches that seek to grow are these:

- How can we be the womb in which an unbeliever grows into a believer because of the life of Jesus we share?
- How can we, in the unity of faith, strengthen the close network of relationships and common life that nurtures trust in Jesus as Lord?
- How can we become a community of faith in which baptisms are a regular celebration and in which people eagerly worship, pray, learn, and serve together?

Jesus is praying for us and for all believers to be one in him.

To be one in faith, in love, and in hope in Jesus.

Why? So that unbelievers will know that God sent Jesus to love them – by the love they receive from us.

And so this church will grow – baptism by baptism.

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen