**Weekend of Sunday, May 21, 2022**

**7th Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Year A**

**First Reading: Acts 1:6-14**

**Second Reading: 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11**

**Gospel Reading: John 17:1-11**

**Sermon Title: *"Anchored in Unity: Strengthened through Trials"***

**Theme**

Our faith in Christ does not make us immune from the scorn of others. Nevertheless, we are to resist the designs of evil when we experience disparagement from others because we trust God’s grace will strengthen and guide us.

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Acts 1:6-14**

6When [the apostles] had come together, they asked [Jesus], “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”  
 12Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. 13When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

**Second Reading: 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11**

12Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. 14If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.  
 5:6Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. 7Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. 8Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. 9Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. 10And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. 11To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

**Gospel: John 17:1-11**

1After Jesus had spoken these words [to his disciples], he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, 2since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. 3And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 4I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. 5So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.  
 6“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. 10All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

**Sermon**

Today, on this Seventh and last Sunday of Easter, we gather to draw inspiration from the scriptures and discover the strength that lies within our unity as believers. I find a common thread running through the prescribed readings, and that thread is — the call to unity and the promise of God's strength in the face of trials.

I am going to begin with the end in mind. Here is the conclusion of the sermon: As we navigate the challenges of life, may we be encouraged to stand firm together, knowing that our unity not only brings us closer to God but also empowers us to overcome every obstacle that comes our way.

And, by the way, I will be illustrating this sermon with pictures and maps of the events referred to, so let’s get started.

Pic of Cenacle and Map 1

The lectionary editors have skipped a few chapters of Jesus’s Farewell Discourse. Last week we were in Chapter 14 and this weekend we are in Chapter 17. Jesus was still in the Upper Room where he presided over the Last Supper. Today this location is called the Cenacle. It is not the actual room where the Last Supper was held, but it is the traditional location where the Last Supper was held.

If you have a red-letter edition of the Bible, you would be able to see that almost all the text from Chapter 13 through Chapter 17 is red, and that is because Jesus had been teaching his disciples and preparing them for his departure. And now, in Chapter 17, in what is known as his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prayed for himself and for his disciples.

John, the author of this Gospel, was a first-hand eye-witness to this event, and he gave us the privilege of witnessing Jesus's heartfelt prayer before he left the safety of the Upper Room and faced his Passion. At that moment, yes, he prayed for himself, but also for his immediate disciples, and not only his immediate disciples, but for all those who would come to believe in him through their work of telling the Gospel. Just imagine the weight of that prayer – yes, for himself that he would have the tenacity to get through the next several hours faithfully, but also for the success of his ministry that he was willing to die for and leave in his disciples' hands. And what did Jesus emphasize in that prayer? His desire was for them to be united, just as he and the Father are united. Jesus recognized that their unity will be a powerful testimony to the world.

This prayer reveals the significance of our unity as believers. It is not merely a call to agree on matters of faith, but a deeper call to love one another – even sacrificially. And when we stand united, the world sees the nature of our faith, and God's love shines brightly through us.

I picked up a copy of Billy Graham's autobiography recently and have been reading through it. Graham never wanted to be a pastor. All he ever aspired to be was an evangelist – yes there is a difference. He discovered the difference early on in his ministry. He would come to town and thousands would come out to hear him and people by the hundreds would come forward to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. But then he would move on to another town, and those folks who had received Christ were left not knowing what to do with their new-found faith. After much criticism by local pastors, Graham's organization began working with local churches months before he arrived, preparing them to take on the pastoral responsibility for these new Christians. You see, Christians are made for come-unity.

Recently, I announced that I am trying to restart our relationship with New Beginnings Outreach Ministry. The membership of NBOM is not Lutheran, their style of worship is not like ours, and they don’t share our pasty pale skin color, but honestly, we get along better than the Christian denominations I witnessed in Israel. I still find it fascinating that folks who call themselves “Christian” don’t get along with each other.

Out of respect for Jesus’s prayer, let us fervently pray for and actively pursue the unity that Jesus desired for his Church, knowing that our strength and effectiveness as witnesses depend on it.

Moving onto the First Reading from Acts, Jesus has been crucified and resurrected and has been seen by many folks for several days – forty days if you go with tradition. Luke, the author of Acts, allows us to bear witness to that crucial moment before the Ascension of Jesus.

Chapel of the Ascension and Rock

Jesus gathered his disciples on the "mount called Olivet," also known as the Mount of Olives, which is a Sabbath’s days walk from Jerusalem. According to the Law of Moses (Exod. 16:29 and Num. 35:5) an observant Jew was permitted to travel 2,000 cubits on the Sabbath, about 1.2 km, or about three-quarters of a mile. Today, there is a very easily overlooked little shrine on the traditional spot of the Ascension. And the only feature inside is this small outcropping of rock which is said to be the last place Jesus stood before ascending into the heavens.

Just before his Ascension, the disciples, still confused but eager for the restoration of Israel's kingdom, asked Jesus about the timing of his reign. Jesus responded, directing their attention to a greater purpose. He told them to wait for the Holy Spirit's power and be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Map 2

Actually what Jesus said was “8bin Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This map illustrates how small that area is – excluding the ends of the earth.

This passage from Acts teaches us the importance of aligning ourselves with God's timing and purpose. It reminds us that our individual desires should not overshadow God in Christ’s greater plan for the Kingdom of God.

Now listen to me carefully: I am not saying anything negative about our Food Distribution ministry – feeding the hungry is great godly work that Jesus himself did, so if it was important to Jesus it ought to be important to us. But given Jesus’s prayer was that all Christians be united as one body, I wonder if we shouldn’t work at least as hard if not harder on our relationship with other Christian bodies, like NBOM - it was important to Jesus it ought to be important to us.

In his First Letter, the apostle Peter addressed the challenges faced by the early Christians. He assured them that trials and suffering are not unusual but rather are *opportunities* for them to 'share in Christ's sufferings,' and be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Confirmation classes are over for the season, and so after worship on Sunday, I have arranged for a *suffering event* so that we can 'share in Christ’s sufferings' as Peter wrote. Are you all down with that? Of course not! Suffering is overrated, and I thank God that much human suffering is mitigated, at least in our culture.

Peter encouraged the believers to humble themselves under God's mighty hand, casting all their anxieties on God, for God cares for them.

We will face trials in various forms, but Peter reminds us that we are not alone. Our unity in Christ empowers us to endure and overcome. When we “Share-A-Meal” or “Do God’s Work With Our Hands,” or simply sit with others in their sufferings we humble ourselves before God, find solace in the knowledge that God cares for us, and has provided us with brothers and sisters in the faith who will help us in our trials. In times of hardship, we are to find strength in our shared experiences, supporting and encouraging one another, knowing that the same sufferings that challenge us also strengthen us.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Brothers and sisters, let us be encouraged by the power of the unity we have with other Christians. Together, we can embrace God's timing and purpose, find strength through trials, and fulfill the prayer of our Savior for unity. As we navigate the challenges of life, may we be encouraged to stand firm *together*, knowing that our unity not only brings us closer to God in Christ but also empowers us to overcome every obstacle that comes our way.

**Prayer**

Redeeming God, you call us to be one with you and one with one another, as you are one with Christ. As his perfect love casts out fear, and changes it to love, unite us with all Christians so that the world may bear witness to your love through us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen