The Holy Gospel according to John. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

20“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, 21that 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. 22The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23I 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.

24Father, 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.

25Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26I 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.”

The Gospel of our Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Beloved in Christ: grace and peace to you from God - our loving Creator, Jesus Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, living and active among us this day and always. Amen.

Your Nebraska Synod staff gathers for Staff Meetings on the first and third Tuesday of each month. During these meetings, we make time to go through a prayer list, which we regularly update with concerns and celebrations from across the Nebraska Synod. We pray for you when we know you’re facing surgery, or when your celebrating the birth of a new family member. We pray for you when your congregation celebrates an anniversary or struggles with a time of conflict or disaster. We pray for partners in Region 4 and the rest of the synods in the ELCA. We pray for our Presiding Bishop and the Churchwide Organization. We pray for our companions in Tanzania, Argentina, and Uruguay, for our ecumenical partners, and for God’s church in all times and places. We believe that prayer is one of the ways we can serve you, and I hope that you pray for us as well.

Sometimes, however, it’s worth asking ourselves: why, exactly, do we pray? We are people who believe and confess that God numbers the hairs on our heads - well, those of us who have hairs to number, that is. If the old beloved hymn is to be believed, God’s eye is on the sparrow, and we know God watches us as well. So why do we bother with prayer, when we believe God already knows that prayer before we raise it?

We pray to remember. We pray to be re-membered. In prayer, the Holy Spirit re-members us, making us a community. Prayer brings us together across distance and time, making the joys and sorrows of one person the joys and sorrows of an entire community through the power of the Holy Spirit. Prayer aligns us with the love of God in ways we don’t completely understand, and almost all of us believe we should pray more often and with greater fervency.

Prayer is also a practice we learned from Jesus, and it’s worth noting that here, in these last words with his disciples, Jesus is praying. The church - the communion of saints that was, that is, and that is to come - is a community for whom Jesus himself prays. We are a community that Jesus re-members in prayer in these last hours of his ministry with his disciples.

John 17 is the final chapter in a long farewell discourse which begins with the washing of the disciples’ feet in chapter 13. In these last words with his friends and followers, Jesus gives the “new commandment” to love one another as Jesus has loved them. He gives the assurance of heavenly dwelling places to which he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He promises the coming of the Holy Spirit to his disciples, through which we abide in Jesus as the true vine, with our sorrow turning to joy and our turmoil giving way to peace. Finally, Jesus prays, and the last words of this gospel text were Jesus’ last words with his disciples. From this moment, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he was met by Judas, taken into custody, and crucified the next day.

If prayer really does re-member us as a church, this is the moment from which that re-membering takes its meaning. In all of John 17, Jesus prays “that they may be one, as we are one;” “that they may all be one;” and “that they may become completely one” — there is no other way to interpret what Jesus is asking of God in this moment. Jesus’ final prayer with his disciples shows us his vision for the church: a body as unified in mind, spirit, and purpose as Jesus was and is with God the Creator and God the Holy Spirit. So: almost 2,000 years after Jesus’ prayer; 1,700 years after the Council of Nicea; almost 1,000 years after the Great Schism of 1054; 500 years after the Protestant Reformation, as the congregations, ministries, and members of the Nebraska Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America gather in Assembly, I have to ask: how’s that unity for which Jesus prayed working out?

Of course, we struggle with God’s desire for unity as much as we struggle with all of God’s desires for us. We confess that we are captive to division and disunity, and cannot free ourselves. We’ve been this way from the moment this prayer landed in the ears of Jesus’ disciples. However, if we keep reading, we see that there’s a deeper purpose behind Jesus’ prayer for unity, one which has little to do with religious institutionalism and everything to do with our purpose as part of God’s one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

Jesus prayed “that they may be one” SO THAT:

**So that the world may believe that God sent Jesus.**

**So that the world may know that God loves us even as God loves Jesus.**

**So that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.**

Jesus didn’t pray for the church to be one for the sake of the church. Jesus prayed that the church would be one for the sake of the *world*.

We can do more for the sake of the world when we act as one church. We can do more for the sake of our communities when we act as one church. We can do more for each other when we act as one church. As individuals, the Nebraska Synod is 80,000 people limited by time, distance, and the fundamental laws of physics to a very small sphere of influence. We are better together than we could ever be as individuals. We support each other and encourage each other - together. We build camps and retreat centers, orphanages and hospitals, colleges and ministry centers - together. People across the world are wrapped in quilts we’ve made in love - together. We welcome immigrants and refugees in safe, new beginnings - together. We help our neighbors recover from tornadoes and floods and surround them with love and support - together. We do God’s work with our hands - together.

When we act as one church, we are better together - and the Holy Spirit is driving us to find more ways for this one church to be better together. We can be better together as 220 congregations in sixteen mission clusters across Nebraska. We can be better together as partners with 64 ELCA synods and the Churchwide Organization. We can be better together as companions to the Northern Diocese of the ELCT and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Argentina and Uruguay.

The unity for which Jesus prayed doesn't come through agreeing as a church to adopt one political viewpoint or one ironclad way of looking at the world. The unity for which Jesus prayed doesn't come through enforcing one worship style or language. The unity for which Jesus prayed comes to the church by the Spirit of God, a reality that is already present and at work in the world. Jesus wasn't asking his friends to establish one church that would adopt every practice and every tradition together for the rest of eternity. Jesus was praying that his friends would love each other deeply, becoming united through those bonds of love. Jesus was praying that his friends would be united through their dedication to selfless service in a world that would often be hostile to them. Jesus was praying that his friends would see that, in him, they were already united: one church, better together.

Today is the seventh Sunday in the season of Easter. Next week is the Feast of Pentecost, which we often consider the beginning of the age of the church. In this age, in this place, the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ is re-membering all of us, making us one for the sake of the world. Every time we work with each other, we are re-membered and are living out Jesus’ prayer. Every time we help our neighbors, we are re-membered and are living out Jesus’ prayer. As we move into God’s future, we trust that through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will live out the mission for which Jesus prayed: one church, better together. Thanks be to God. Amen.