

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Sermon for Week of Christian Unity

Preached by Bishop Dr. Munib Younan

Tuesday, 24 January 2017

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Jerusalem

Acts 9:17-19 (The scales fall from Saul's eyes)

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Thank you, and welcome to our honored guests, to the clergy from the churches of Jerusalem, and to all of our sisters and brothers in Christ who have come to Lutheran Church of the Redeemer on this day to pray for Christian Unity. May our prayers, our songs, and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in the sight of Jesus, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We are gathered to pray for the unity of the church, and we do so because God has called us here for this purpose. Indeed, our Lord Jesus has prayed to the Father, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they

may all be one.” (John 17:20-21) Unity is our Lord’s desire for us. Jesus has called each of us to pray—and to act—for the unity of his beloved church.

But sometimes when Christ calls, he does it in a way that we do not understand.

When we consider the story of Saul and his conversion, which we have heard today, we see that Christ comes unexpectedly to Saul while he is on the road to Damascus. Christ comes in a flash of light and a voice from heaven. Christ comes with a message: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” And when Saul stood up, although his eyes were open, he could no longer see.

Now, when Jesus called Saul, transforming him from a persecutor of Christians into Paul, one of the great saints of the church, he could have sent him immediately. He could have sent him that day, saying, “Go, and preach the Gospel! Go, take the Good News to the Gentiles! Go, and counsel the churches!” But he did not do this immediately. Jesus first sent Saul to Damascus. And Saul obeyed—he went to the city, although he could not see, and although he did not know what awaited him there.

For three days, Saul was blind. For three days, he neither ate nor drank, but only waited for the Lord to lead him. Finally, a disciple named Ananias came to Saul, laid his hands on him, and prayed. “And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored.”

The story of Saul’s conversion reveals something important about our call to Christian unity. Like Saul, we have heard the voice of Jesus. Like Saul, we want to follow. We want to serve him. We want to be one, as

the Father and the Son are one! But in spite of our prayers, unity has not come immediately. In spite of our willingness, we are still on a journey, of which we cannot see the ending.

We must admit that as churches, we are like Saul. Our desire to follow is not enough. Our desire for Christian unity is not enough. Like Saul, we are first in need of healing.

As churches, we have scales on our eyes which keep us from seeing Christ in the other, even other Christians. These scales are called tradition, theology, history, pride, status quo, and sometimes deep pain from past disagreements. Like Saul, we cannot follow the Lord's call until these scales have fallen from our eyes. We cannot be one, until we can see the image of Christ in each other clearly.

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. For Lutherans, this is a moment of joy and repentance. We celebrate the reformers who gave us great works of systematic theology on justification by faith. We celebrate that the Bible has been translated into the vernacular. We celebrate the music and art that has come from the Reformation movement.

But we do not celebrate the division of the church. Our Lord has not called us to congratulate ourselves on 500 years of living, praying, and serving separately from our sisters and brothers.

Both Lutherans and Catholics have heard the call of Christ to seek reconciliation. For this reason, fifty years ago, the Lutheran and Catholic churches began a dialogue. Together, in faith, we embarked on a journey of understanding. It has been a long, sometimes painful, and often frustrating process. Fifty years is a very long time to wait—a fact we know very well in Palestine! For fifty years, the Lutheran and

Catholic churches have prayed that the scales would fall from our eyes, and that we would be healed.

One outcome of this fifty-year journey of dialogue was last year's worship service of Common Prayer in Sweden, co-hosted by Pope Francis, by Rev. Martin Junge, the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, and by myself as the President of the LWF. This Common Prayer, which took place on Reformation Day at the beginning of this 500th anniversary year, was an historic reconciliation. It was a moment that no one could have envisioned fifty years ago. I was deeply honored to have co-hosted and co-led, with the Pope, such a visible sign of Christian unity, and to sign a joint statement of ongoing reconciliation.

The prayer service in Sweden consisted of three parts. First, it was a service of thanksgiving. We gave thanks for the good work of both our churches, for the faithfulness of Lutherans and Catholics across the world, who have shared the Gospel have served the Lord Jesus within their own traditions.

Secondly, it was a service of repentance. We confessed and repented of our divisions, of the pain we have caused each other. We confessed that both churches have had scales on our eyes and therefore we could not see Christ in one another. We have been blind for five hundred years! For this reason, we could not recognize our common call. Like Saul, we needed Ananias to lay hands on us and heal us—and Ananias came to us in the form of theological dialogue. Ananias also came to us through the desire of the many Lutheran and Catholic disciples who said to church leaders, “We want to be healed. We want to be reconciled. We want to pray and serve together as one.”

Finally, our Common Prayer in Lund was a service of commitment. We have affirmed that what joins us together is the holy sacrament of

baptism, where we are engrafted into the one Body of Christ as brothers and sisters. And we have committed to act together in the spirit of our one baptism, with one mission, for the sake of our neighbors. Towards this end, Caritas and Lutheran World Relief/World Service have signed an agreement to seek ways to be in service together. For Lutherans and Catholics today, unity means prophetic diakonia, service to others.

Some journalists have asked me if Lutherans and Catholics will celebrate communion together in one common mass. My answer is this: The Holy Spirit has led us to Sweden, and has brought together a Pope, a Lutheran Bishop, and the LWF General Secretary on Reformation Day. Who could ever imagine this? As we see that the Holy Spirit is illogical and unpredictable, who can say what will happen in the future? Just because we cannot imagine communion together right now does not mean it will not happen. In our joint statement, we have said that our churches are yearning for the day when we can together celebrate Holy Communion. We cannot know the future, but we trust that the Lord will one day not only heal our eyes, but also our hearts and the divisions in the Body of Christ.

This week, here in Jerusalem, I feel this same spirit of unity, of hope, and of trust in the one God we worship. We have heard the call of Christ, and we join our hearts in prayer to answer to that call. But we recognize that unity will not come quickly. It will not come easily. Christ has called us to this journey, and we do not know where it will lead.

Every year we celebrate this week of prayer for Christian Unity, and some people say, “What can prayer do in the face of such deep and historic divisions?” We are aware that our differences remain. We are aware also that the grassroots, the people in the pews, are asking for practical and visible signs of unity—celebrating a common Easter in

Jerusalem, for example. Some will see this week of prayer as wasted time, when we could be doing something more pragmatic.

But I tell you, without journeying to Damascus, Saul's conversion would not have been complete. Without the prayer of Ananias, the scales would not have fallen from his eyes, and Saul would not have been healed. Obeying the call of Christ is never wasted time. When Christ calls us, we must trust in the process, trust in the journey, and above all commit ourselves to prayer. For as Jesus said to the disciples, frustrated when they could not cast out a demon from a suffering boy: "This kind can only come out through prayer." (Mark 9:29)

One thing we can be sure of, and that is that when we are seeking God's will, God hears our prayers. Our prayers for unity have already been answered through the trust and friendship we share across our various traditions. Trust and friendship make it easier to be in partnership—and make it much harder to be in competition.

We must continue to pray that the scales will fall from our eyes, that we may see one another clearly. We must pray for a conversion. Not for the sake of uniformity! And not for the sake of our own glory! But for the sake of the poor, the sick, the refugee, the oppressed and occupied, for all our suffering neighbors, and for this broken world which hungers and thirsts for the Good News.

Perhaps the churches of Jerusalem will never share one building, but we can share one mission—to be living witnesses of Christ's love, from Jerusalem to all the ends of the earth. And if ecumenism succeeds in Jerusalem, it will succeed in the whole world. Unity does not come from halls of power, but from the City of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

I would like to close with a prayer, written by an Anglican clergyman, and which is found in nearly every Lutheran hymnal. Let us pray:

"Lord God,

You have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out in good courage, not knowing where we go but only that Your hand is leading us and Your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."