

John 17:20-26

Early in the morning on July 4, 1944, American forces were moving against Hitler's army. They had taken the beach at Normandy and were pushing south into France toward Paris. The 82nd Airborne was leading the way. Fighting their way across open fields and over hills, they were making good progress. But that morning the order came to back up in retreat. The 82nd had been moving so quickly that the American forces on their flanks--on both sides--were not able to keep up. The soldiers were angry. They wanted to keep going. But the order came from General Eisenhower. Even though these soldiers could have busted through the enemy lines, it was more important, for winning the war, that his army be unified and stay together.

And this, my fellow Christians, is what Jesus prays for in our text. 2,000 years ago, with His disciples listening in, Jesus was praying not just for them; He was praying for you...for you who would believe through their word--the word of the apostles which has come to you. Four times in His brief prayer, Jesus uses the word "one." Even before you were born, Jesus was praying that you would be one, unified with Him and with His Father, but even more, one with all Christians.

If you are part of Jesus' church--the one, holy, Christian church on earth--then you are part of the Church Militant. The church is always at war. We fight, not flesh and blood, but "*the powers and forces of darkness*," says the apostle, "*the spiritual forces of wickedness*." Every baptized Christian is in this battle, even those who choose not to fight. If you have been baptized into Christ, the devil is your enemy who has planned your defeat. There is no running off to Canada to avoid the draft. As with terrorism, Satan brings the fight to you...into your marriage, and family, into your workplace, and classroom, into your congregation, into your heart and life. And his plan is simple, and yet ingenious. "Divide and conquer." His goal--his plan for your defeat--is to separate you from the fighting church. Satan wants for you the exact opposite of what Jesus wants.

This is why Jesus, in praying for you says, "*that they, Father, may be one*." You became one with Christ in your baptism. No one is baptized into themselves. You are baptized into Christ to be one with Him and with His church. And so Jesus prays not that you become one, but that you remain one with Him and His church.

You see, Jesus knows that General Satan has his game plan all worked out. You are like the 82nd Airborne. You've been baptized. You've been catechized. Now you are about to be confirmed. You're making good progress. You're busting through the enemy lines. You're punching through by quoting Bible verses, by reciting memory work, by making confirmation vows. And that's good. Would that all of the congregation was keeping up with you in these things.

But here's the challenge. Here's the temptation. You have been unified with Christ and His church through worship and catechism instruction. Now, after confirmation, things change. You are not in class anymore. The demands of high school, and after that, college and career, attempt to pull you away from the worshiping congregation. The reason why so many confirmands fall away--some quickly, some over time--is that the things that were unifying them with Christ and His fighting church become less and less a part of their life.

Eisenhower would not allow that to happen to his army in France. The 82nd wanted to keep moving. "We're making good progress," was their excuse, "It's okay if our flanks are exposed and vulnerable. We'll be fine moving forward by ourselves." "No!" said Eisenhower. He knew what would happen if

they moved forward alone. Hitler's army would swing around and surround them, and they would be destroyed.

The same drive and determination that lived in these soldiers, lives in us. We don't place as high a priority on being unified as Jesus does. That's because we're rebellious. We like to choose our own path. We want our independence. We're worse than cats. Dogs you can train to follow you. Cats you can't. And people? Forget about it. The Old Adam in us wants nothing to do with following Jesus. It wants nothing to do with remaining one with His church.

But here's the good thing. Jesus not only prayed for you 2,000 years ago; He prays for you now. Your hope is not in the confirmation vows you will make. Your hope is in Jesus who prays for you. The power is not in our words to God. The power is in the words of our Lord. The same words which have been sown like seeds into your heart through worship and catechism instruction. The same words which Jesus speaks to the Father on your behalf.

This is why you add to your vows today, "*by the grace of God.*" When you say, "*I will...I will remain faithful even unto death...I will remain unified, one with Jesus and His church,*" you will think you can do this all by yourself. Like the 82nd Airborne, you will feel ready to charge ahead and keep your vows every day of your life. But we are weak. We are mortal. We are sinful. Just look at the bodies scattered over the battleground. Soldiers of Christ who promised to be faithful, but who became easy targets of the devil for they did not live by the grace of God to remain one with His church. And so today you add to your vows, "*I will...by the grace of God.*" It is His grace that moves Him to pray for you. It is His grace that sent Him to the cross for you.

You see, Jesus knows something about becoming one. He became one with your sins on the cross. He became so united to your sin that He became sin. In the Psalms Jesus even calls Himself the sinner, because all of your sin, and the sin of the whole world, was charged to Him. What does this mean? It means that you are forgiven of your sins. God forgives your stubbornness and rebelliousness. Jesus became the stubborn, rebellious one in your place. He was punished for your wrongs. You, every one of you, is forgiven by the grace of God.

And this grace, this forgiveness, is given to you here at the altar in a special way to keep you one with Christ and His church. There is no place on earth where the unity, the oneness of the church, is expressed so clearly as here in the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. We cannot remain one on our own. Christ keeps us unified. Jesus, who became one with you by His death and resurrection, draws you to Himself so that you, with the church on earth and the church in heaven, are united as one.

When you promise to be faithful by the grace of God, this grace is no secret power, no magical force. His grace sits on the altar. His grace is in the baptismal font. His grace is spoken by the mouth of your pastor. Through your continuing in these things, God's grace will be evident in your life and you will remain one with Him and with His church.

You have read the history books. You know how the war against Hitler turned out. He was defeated. And it's largely because the 82nd Airborne, along with all the other fighting forces, remained unified and fought together as one army. For you, the war is not over. Jesus already defeated your enemies, but many of His soldiers, by wandering from the fighting church, end up losing the war. Today is your confirmation day. It is not the day when your battles come to an end. It is the day that marks the beginning of your fellowship at the altar. You became soldiers of Jesus' army in your baptism. You

have been given the weapons of His Word. Now you are privileged to come forward to Jesus' altar and faithfully receive His body and blood for you, that you, with all His precious soldiers, may be and remain one, both now and forever. Amen.