

Florida-Bahamas Synod Assembly
October 12, 2017
Kissimmee, Florida

Text: John 17:20-24
Theme: "I Ask...That They May Be One...That the
the World Might Believe "

As we gather together at this Assembly, approaching the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, how is your spirit? For many, if not all of us, there is no shortage of things to occupy our minds and trouble our hearts. My list is rather long. I'm troubled by the ratcheting up of international tension with potentially disastrous results. As I recall the words of Jesus, frequently quoted by my mother, "Do unto others as you would have them to do you," I'm troubled by a divisive spirit within society that leads to harsh words and destructive behavior and which sometimes filters into the church. Remembering Jesus' words, "What you do to the least of these, you do to me" and his corresponding words of judgment, "I am troubled by our response to those who lack shelter, who are sick, who struggle with poverty, who wonder if there is a place where they are wanted and might call home." My mind is occupied by the question, are we more caught up in a romanticized version of the past, including the Reformation, than wrestling with what that Reformation means for the church's life and witness today? And then, there are the matters closer to home - significant illnesses for dear friends and family, the occasional choice of despair, addiction, and worse among those whom we love. That's some of my list? I wonder if yours is all that different.

What is our response to those things that occupy our minds and trouble our hearts? Ah, let's find some political leaders with humility, courage, integrity, compassion who have a passion for justice-but who in the process will take care of my interests. Or, let's identify a bishop with a servant heart, vision, leadership skills, a relentless work ethic-but whose words will not challenge me or the status quo in our congregation or synod. Maybe we can all roll up our sleeves, grudgingly work even harder and then declare the truth that at least we tried before yielding to renewed cynicism. One response to all these things is withdrawal, going it alone. Given the things that occupy our minds and trouble our hearts, I was not surprised by a news story the other day that claimed that loneliness is now matching smoking as a major killer. Don't underestimate the words of Martin Luther's hymn, "The old Satanic foe has sworn to work us woe! With craft and dreadful might, he arms himself to fight. On earth he has no equal. No strength of ours can match his might! We would be lost, rejected....". (A Mighty Fortress is Our God)

Acknowledging that we come here with all manner of things occupying our minds and troubling our hearts, can we enter into this Assembly and simply hear Jesus praying for us? Who is this Jesus? The Holy Writer has told us, he is the "Word of God made flesh" (1:14), he is "...the light that shines in darkness and the darkness has not overcome it (1:5). He is the one who interrupts the stoning of a woman caught in the act of adultery and says to the prosecutors, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone" and then to her, "Where are those who accuse you? Neither do I accuse you. Go, and sin no more" (John 7:3-10). He is the one who in the heat of the day dares to ask a foreign woman for a drink of water and then offers her "living water" (John 4). He is the one who declares, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." (10:27-28).

The one who prays for us in the one who, though himself "troubled in spirit" will have a meal with his friends who also have occupied minds and troubled hearts (13:21). He will wash their feet and invite them, henceforth, to do that for one another. He announces that others will know that they belong to him because of their self-evident love for one another. Mindful that neither they nor we can do such things of our own accord, he prays for them and for us, "I ask not only on

their behalf, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word...". That's you and me-we who are gathered here with occupied minds and troubled hearts. He prays that the unity between God the Father and God the Son might enfold this whole motley group so that in the face of one another they may see God and the beloved Son. In the process, Jesus prays, "that they may all be one." One, the word is used four times in this text. This does not mean that they will look alike, think alike, act alike. It does mean that they will know that they and this world are wrapped up together in the love of God that will not let go of them. For what purpose? Jesus' prayer continues, "...that the world may believe that you have sent me." The world with all of its confusion and disaster is the object of God's love. "God so loved the world so that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in me might not perish but have life" (3:16). Even better, Jesus prays that his disciples, then and now, and the world, might see something of God's glory made known in the face of Christ. The woman at the well, the woman caught in the act of adultery and forgiven, the disciples whose feet are washed-all know something of the glory of God.

Oh, dear siblings in Christ with occupied minds and troubled hearts, do you hear Jesus praying for us? We are invited only to listen and to trust that he has the authority and the will to enact that for which he prays. He does and he will. Early in the Gospel Jesus had declared, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). Jesus turns the idea of "glory" upside down. He reveals his glory in a love that absorbs evil, betrayal and then declares, "It is finished." The one who prays for us is lifted up on a cross, lifted into a tomb, and then raised to new life. But we who have occupied minds and troubled hearts are not so easily persuaded. It will take the risen Lord breaking into our fear-filled spaces, stunning us again with his glory that declares, "Peace, be with you"-peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, a promise that is trustworthy. You don't believe it. Hear it again, the prayer is being enacted, filled full, "Peace, be with you." And he breathes on us the Holy Spirit. "Even as the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Do you see something of this love that gives birth to deep unity, to a relentless love for one another and for this world, and that has the possibility of inviting the world to faith-even among those of us with occupied minds and troubled hearts? I have-in congregations who gather to confess sins, to receive forgiveness, to have troubled hearts trumped by the gift of the Holy Spirit, in synod staff who give incredibly for the life of Christ in this synod, in the work of generosity that creates the possibility of Lutheran Disaster Response for work in places of deep loss, in a synod whose anxiety is prompted by the Holy Spirit driven desire to be faithful in this time and place, in gathering in worship with those of the Roman Catholic community to treasure our shared baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection, in congregations like Abiding Savior, Wesley Chapel, and Resurrection, Cocoa Beach who take seriously Jesus invitation to feed the hungry and to create a welcome for those who cannot expect it, in a conversation in the hot tub by the pool with an African American with whom we share precious time and then end in prayers. Who could have imagined such holy things in which we discover the promise of answered prayer-the gifts of unity, authentic love, and something of the glory of God. Don't you have your stories do-stories that speak to being wrapped up in divine love, stories that speak of unity that cannot be denied, stories in which we even now see something of the glory of God?

How is your spirit? We are not left with occupied minds and troubled hearts. We listen to our Lord Jesus who even now prays for us and then gives us that for which he has prayed. "God's Word forever shall abide, no thanks to foes who fear it; for God himself fights by our side with weapons of the Spirit. Were they to take our house, goods, honor, child, or spouse, though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. The kingdom's ours forever." So much for occupied minds and troubled hearts! Amen!

