

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, June 01, 2025

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Prisca Lee-Pae

on

Acts 16:16–34; John 17:20–26

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That they may all be one

In the final moments before his arrest—before the long, dark road to the cross—Jesus prays. He doesn't pray for strength. He doesn't ask for a way out. He doesn't even pray first for himself. He prays for us. "I ask not only on behalf of these," he says, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." It is the last prayer before the suffering begins. And it's not a prayer for power, protection, or even peace. It is a prayer for unity. Jesus prays that we would be one. Not just as a general idea of harmony, but as he and God the Father are one: a unity of mutual knowledge, trust, sacrifice, and love. That's a staggering thought, isn't it? Can we, as flawed and fragile human beings, really be united the way God the Father and God the Son are united?

Think about what that unity looks like: The Son knows the will of the Father and offers his life to fulfill it. The Father gives everything to the Son and entrusts him with the salvation of the world. They are infinitely trusting, infinitely loving, and infinitely joyful in one another. And Jesus dares to pray that we might be one as they are one. Is such a unity possible? It doesn't feel possible some days, does it? We experience conflict even in our families, in our friendships, in our churches. We divide over politics, theology, race, nationality, sexuality, culture—you name it.

And yet, Jesus didn't just wish for our unity. He prayed for it with deep yearning at the hour of his betrayal. He prayed for our unity because it is not optional—it is integral to the life of God made known in Christ. Unity is not a casual byproduct of faith—it is a fruit of it. It is at the heart of what Jesus came to do. We pray in the Eucharist, "That we and all thy whole Church may be made one body with him." Every time we come to the table, we are not just remembering Christ—we are entering a deeper union with him, and with each other. We are joined in a mystery that breaks through barriers of time, space, language, and culture. That unity is real. It's not just a dream. It's something we enter, something we live, and something we practice.

And still, we ask: How? What makes such unity possible? What power can overcome the walls that divide us? For that answer, we turn to today's story in Acts Ch. 16. Paul and Silas, wrongly accused, are stripped, beaten, and thrown into the innermost cell of a prison. Their feet are shackled. They are surrounded by violence and injustice. But what do they do? They sing. They pray. And suddenly—an earthquake. Doors fly open. Chains fall off. Freedom is at hand. But Paul and Silas do something shocking. They don't run.

They stay—not to spare themselves, but to save the life of the jailer, who is about to take his own life in despair. And in that moment, something greater than an earthquake breaks open: the walls of human division. The jailer—who once held them captive—now washes their wounds. The prisoners—who could have escaped—now bring salvation to their captor.

They eat together. They rejoice together. They are baptized—together. The prisoner and the jailer become one in Christ. This is the kind of unity Jesus prayed for. Not shallow friendliness, but radical transformation. Not comfort in sameness, but communion in difference. Not agreement on every issue, but deep trust in God who makes us family despite it all.

Unity is not uniformity. It's not everyone thinking alike or voting alike or speaking alike. True unity is when we love one another across all that separates us. When we see each other not as threats, but as gifts. When we recognize Christ in the face of the other—especially the other we least expect.

That's what I experienced as I met friends from the Anglican Communion around the world. There was a unity among us that wasn't built on shared culture or language—but on shared faith, a shared table, and a shared Lord. And it is that same unity we are called to live into now.

This is also why, throughout history, many missionaries have left behind familiar worlds to enter cultures radically different from their own: not to erase those cultures, but to honor them by sharing the good news in ways that are truly local, truly human. And this is why, even today, many foreigners come to worship with us at St. Thomas Church. They are drawn not by sameness, but by the presence of Christ in the midst of difference.

We do this because of a deep truth at the heart of our faith—proclaimed by the early Church Father, St. Gregory of Nazianzus—who said, *"What is not assumed is not redeemed."* In other words, whatever part of our humanity Christ did not take on, Christ could not heal. But because he took on the fullness of our human nature—our bodies, our minds, our hearts—all of it can be redeemed. And that includes our cultures, our languages, our stories, our wounds.

The Ascension reminds us that Jesus has lifted all of that—all of us—into the heart of God. He didn't just come for one people in one place. He came to gather all people into one Body. And so we dare to believe that the church, in all its diversity, can reflect the communion of the Trinity: many voices, one song; many cultures, one faith.

So I ask you today: What if the person most different from you is the very person God has sent to teach you about grace? What if the person whose wounds you're called to wash is someone you've misunderstood or even feared? Can we allow our differences to become places of encounter, not division? In this deeply polarized world, Jesus is still praying—for us. Praying that we would be one. Not so we can feel good about ourselves—but so that the world may believe. *"That they may all be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* The unity of the church is not for the church alone. It is a witness to the world that Jesus is alive.

And so, beloved, Let us live the unity Christ prayed for. Let us be the body that breaks bread across difference. Let us be the people who stay when others flee, who heal when others wound, who love when others divide. Let us not be afraid of our differences, but welcome them with joy and repentance. For we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one Savior who still prays for us to be one.