

“Lord, it is good that we are here”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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To echo the words of Peter, it is indeed good that we are here, together, gathered in prayer and in the fellowship of faith. I welcome all of you to St. Mary's Cathedral, and I give thanks that the Holy Spirit has moved us along this path on a journey of mutual love and great hope for the future.

In the Gospel of John, our Lord's prayer to the Father for us couldn't be more explicit: “That they may all be one...” Think of this scene, right after the Last Supper but before Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus prepares to enter into the paschal mystery of his passion, death, and resurrection, he looks on that first band of followers, knowing that this event would forever transform them. But he was also looking at us. He knew that those apostles and all who would come after them would be gravely challenged. He knew that the evil one would try with all his might to scatter and isolate his followers, so that he could separate them from God and from each other. And so, Jesus prayed: “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. 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” (Jn 17).

When we realize our Lord's clear desire that all of his followers should be one, we cannot be satisfied with the state of affairs that we find ourselves in. We cannot just resign ourselves to the separations that still exist. The quest for unity in Christ is an imperative, and not just a nice thing to wish for. It is a necessary part of who we are as followers of Christ. And this unity is not something we can accomplish on our own, by sheer force of will or convincing argument. No, it is a gift of grace, and it requires an openness from us, a willingness to receive that grace.

Dear friends, we believe that all things are possible in and through Christ. If we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains! We believe in Christ. We have faith in him as our Savior and our Redeemer. We believe in him not only as some historical figure that we read about, but as he really is, the living Person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became man. The stronger, the more vibrant, the more sincere our faith in Christ Jesus, the better able we are to come together in common discipleship, the better equipped we are to bear witness to Christ – witness to a common hope we share, a hope that will not disappoint. In a society that is fragmented and torn apart in so many ways – especially by poverty, acrimony, violence, and even death – how important that we are united in bearing witness to the Christian faith, the faith that helps us lead lives of hope and lives of love. What greater way for us to work together for the good of the community and for our sisters and brothers who, as Pope Francis says, “live on the margins” – than by bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, the source of our joy, the reason for our hope, and the purpose of our lives.

Now, of course, we have to be honest. There are significant differences that still remain between us; we can't ignore that fact. But we can approach these as brothers and sisters, with a spirit of prayer and friendship, not as enemies. During these years since the Reformation began, there has been much

violence, even to the point of killing each other. This is preposterous and obscene. We can now approach our differences with a desire for reconciliation and an openness to the grace of the Holy Spirit. We can have hope that is rooted in Jesus himself, in his prayer for us, and in his desire for our unity.

My friends, it seems to me that we have a very important common mission. Our world and our culture have drifted farther and farther from God, and more and more act as if God does not even exist. As we just heard from St. Paul, “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4). Our Lord asks us to be a leaven in the world, a presence that will remind our neighbors that God does exist, that he is near, that he loves us, and that we are made for him. Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk, so he would have been familiar with this saying of St. Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” We are made for God, every one of us. We must be a visible sign to all that God is still God, that Jesus still dwells in our midst as the Incarnate Lord, and that we all have a common hope for eternal life in him. That hope should move us to be different, to live differently than others, not holier than thou, but differently, with a different worldview that looks always to Christ and eternity, that sees others as our brothers and sisters. By our common witness, we must manifest this loving presence of Christ Jesus to our neighbors, through prayer, through charity, through a common striving for unity. Whatever our differences may be, it is not enough to simply dwell on those. We cannot disregard them, but they cannot be what defines our relationship or our presence as followers of Christ in the world. It has been said many times, and it was repeated by Pope Francis last year with the Lutheran leaders in Sweden: what unites us is greater than what divides us.

My brothers and sisters, we have a calling to be agents of change for the good of others. But before we can do this, we need to look within our own hearts to see what interior change is required of us. This we must do before we can even think about going out to change the minds and hearts of others. Whether we are Catholics or Lutherans, Jesus calls each one of us to undergo a conversion of mind and heart. We are called to lead incredibly purposeful lives that radiate the truth and love of Christ and touch others with the transforming message of the Gospel. We do this when we pray, when we give thanks, when we live our faith, and when we serve the common good of society.

We will succeed in changing our world for the better not primarily through programs and strategies, but rather by converting hearts, by leading others to freedom from sin and evil, by helping them discover what we have received as a gift: the liberating power of Christ’s love. In a phrase, we’re called to conquer evil with good and hatred with love. This is the way the Lord builds civilizations; this is the way he restores unity. As we continue on this journey together, a journey and pilgrimage of discovery, I pray that each one of us here and all our brothers and sisters will experience the love of God in an ever deeper way, so that we may be signs of hope and instruments of peace and love in a fractured world. And let us never forget the powerful prayer of Jesus for each one of us: “That they may all be one.”