

Sunday, January 29, 2012 - Ecumenical Service
Zion Lutheran Church, Hollidaysburg

Homily (Based on Habakkuk 3:17-19; 1 Corinthians 15:51-58; John 12:23-26)

In the first frame of a classic Peanuts cartoon, the quiet, peace-loving character Linus is seated in a soft-chair clutching his ever-present security blanket. Linus was watching his favorite TV program.

His boisterous and bossy older sister Lucy walks into the room and without even saying 'hello,' demands that he change TV channels.

In the next frame, Linus asks, "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?"

Lucy responds with a rather ominous stare, "These 5 fingers. Individually they're nothing, but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold."

In the next frame Linus is shown surrendering the remote control for the TV.

In the last frame, Linus is turning away and at the same time he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

I am so very grateful for Bishop Pile and the pastoral staff here at Zion Lutheran Church for organizing this ecumenical service.

I am honored to be with you as the homilist today.

You may be wondering what Linus and Lucy have to do with this gathering. Not to worry, for as St. Paul says in the 2nd reading from Sacred Scripture, "Behold, I will tell you a mystery."

Actually, the words of Christ Jesus our Lord from the Gospel reading tell us explicitly what is at the heart of that mystery: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life."

For us as Christians,

- losing our lives means to become lost or immersed in the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ
- preserving our lives means to become one with the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ

That mystery is at the heart of what we reflect on together in this moment of prayer and what we live in our ecumenical efforts.

St. Paul tells us today as he told the Christians at Corinth, “Thanks be to God who give us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The victory that St. Paul speaks about is the victory over everything that separates us from the love of God and the love of one another, including

- sin
- evil
- the anticipated physical corruption of our bodies that will not last forever
- and even death itself.

Just a few days ago in his principal message for the Week of Christian Unity, Pope Benedict XVI said that Christ speaks of victory through

- suffering love
- reciprocal service
- help, hope and practical comfort given to the lowliest persons around us

That kind of love, service, hope and comfort is not possible if we think that we can just walk in and take over and save the world. Self-righteousness will not bring us the victory we seek for ourselves or others.

Pope Benedict reminds us that for all Christians the loftiest expression of humble service is the person of Jesus Christ and this is expressed in the total gift that he makes of himself on the cross.

And it is expressed in the victory of his love over death that is evident in his resurrection from the dead

Everyone of us can share in that victory only if we allow ourselves to be transformed by God. This requires the kind of conversion that St. Paul speaks about in his 1st letter to the Corinthians: “the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

In other words, we can and should anticipate the power of the resurrection even now, because we have put on Christ through our baptism.

Pope Benedict XVI is convinced, and I share his conviction, that full and visible Christian unity that we long for

- demands that first we must let ourselves be transformed and
- it demands that first must we conform ever more perfectly to the image of Jesus Christ

The unity we pray for today, requires an inner conversion, a transformation that is both

- common and
- personal

Authentic Christian unity is not merely a matter of cordiality or cooperation with one another, which even non-believers can do.

It is not simply a matter of getting organized and pulling ourselves together as tightly as the fist wielded by Lucy, or longed for by her younger brother Linus.

Authentic Christian unity requires that within our respective churches and within ourselves as individuals, we must first work at entering into a new life with Christ who is our true and definitive victory over sin and death.

As a result of that common and personal or individual transformation in Christ, we must bear witness among the people of our time to presence of the living God who makes himself known to us in the person of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

Most of us here today know that there are many people in our world who do not know the person of Jesus Christ.

- Some have never heard the Gospel preached to them
- Some have forgotten him or even rejected him
- Some have been discouraged from reaching out to him or discovering him because we as Christians have not adequately revealed Christ in a way that shows that we have discovered and experienced the transformation that comes only through his victory.

We believe in the paradox that is at the heart of the mystery of Christ's transforming victory. What might appear to some as mere passivity when Jesus died on the Cross is in truth the most powerful deliberate act taken by God who willed to save us through his only Son.

There is certainly some truth to what Lucy said when she slowly curled her fingers into a fist: "Individually they're nothing, but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold."

Individually, we might be nothing,

- but when we choose to be transformed individually and collectively by the victory of Christ's death and resurrection
- and when we are thereby formed into a single unit, not by our doing but by the transforming power of Christ

Then we can and we will be formed into something awesome to behold.

In that tragic and comic encounter between Linus and Lucy, peace-loving Linus asked two questions, one of Lucy and one of himself:

- what makes you think you can come in here and just take over?
- why can't you get organized like that?

If there is food for thought or a lesson to be learned today in the Word of God that we have heard and over which we reflect and pray in this service, its how we might connect those two questions to our

ecumenical awareness and actions as individuals or as churches and communities of faith.

Linus readily recognized the presence of powerful forces that were a threat to his peace, security, integrity and dignity as a human person.

He also had a sense that if things were better organized, he would have a better chance of safeguarding his peace, security, integrity, and dignity as a human person.

Thanks be to God that we are able to recognize not only the powerful forces that work against us, but that we are able to recognize that in Christ we find our victory over all those forces.

And thanks be to God that we have a sense, no better yet, we have a common belief, that if we are better organized, we can and will have a better chance of safeguarding our peace, security, integrity, and dignity as human persons.

And most important, we can and will have a better chance of fulfilling the call given to us as a result of our faith in the victory of Christ, that we are to work at safeguarding the peace, security, integrity, and dignity not just of ourselves, but of all persons.

All of that is at the heart of our ecumenical attitude and action because all of that is at the heart of the mystery of Christ our crucified and risen Savior.

Peaceful coexistence would be nice; but transformation and victory are what Christ is all about.

If that sounds like a rather tall-order for our ecumenical attention today, let me conclude with the reassuring words of St. Paul that we heard today.

He says, "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

And St. Paul adds, “Therefore, my beloved sisters and brothers, be firm, be steadfast, and always be fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

If I can be so bold as to think that I can add or say something better than St. Paul, I would like to include these words of encouragement and perspective:

- Thanks be to God, in our local communities there are committed Christians who through their faith in the victory of Christ are not at all naïve or passive in their response to the forces that think they can take over
- And thanks be to God, in our local communities there are committed Christians who have faith in God who is our strength, and therefore they do not limit themselves to asking how they can get organized, but they have actually come together and have in so many meaningful ways begun to respond to those negative forces with the victorious and transforming love of Jesus Christ.
- These victorious Christians among us are firm, steadfast, devoted, and they do not labor in vain.
- No one will make them change the channel.