6 June 2021 Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Pentecost 2 Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

"Unite and Conquer"
Text: Mark 3:20-35; Genesis 3:8-15; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Divide and conquer is the devil's strategy.
Unite and conquer is God's way.

Divide and conquer. It's what satan has been doing from the beginning. He divided Adam and Eve from God and then from each other. He divided Cain and his brother Abel, Isaac and his brother Ishmael, and Esau and his brother Jacob. He divides families, friends, neighbors. He pits us against one another so that we see each other as people we are competing with, people to be overcome and conquered, rather than as fellow redeemed.

It is said that our nation is more divided than it ever has been before. Perhaps. But should we be surprised? It is satan's way. Get us to see each other as evil and so ignore him - the true evil one - as he goes about his work of further dividing us. And not just dividing us into small groups, but all the way down to ones, a world of individuals. The hyper-individualism, the me-first, the truth is whatever I think it is, that we see today.

But it actually goes even further than that, as satan is not satisfied with dividing us from one another, but even within ourselves, as people now divide their minds from their bodies - their minds can be one thing while their body is another. That's actually been going on for quite some time; an ancient heresy that satan has recycled and is using in a newly modified way.

But he's just up to his old trick. Divide and conquer. That's the history of a world plunged into sin.

So we heard today of some scribes who accused Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, and casting out demons by the power of the demonic. They made that accusation because they're trying to divide - divide Jesus from the church, divide Jesus from respectable people, divide Jesus from those who were following Him. But Jesus shows the absurdity of that. Satan is not going to cast out his own. Satan is not going to divide himself or his own kingdom and so hurt himself and his efforts. Why would he do that? He's not going to divide and conquer himself! His target is the kingdom of God. So their accusation doesn't hold water; doesn't make sense. They're just spouting off.

And then Jesus says two things about what He is actually doing. **First**, He is not working in league with satan, He is actually *plundering* satan. He has come into this world, He has come into satan's house, to bind him and take back the people He created. *That's* what He's doing when He casts out demons. He is binding satan and his minions and taking back His own, one person at a time. It is the same thing that still happens today in Holy Baptism. For there, in that water combined with the Word of God, the Word of God made flesh is casting out unclean spirits and making children of God. **Uniting us to God.** Every time a person is baptized Jesus is plundering satan - from child of man to child of God, from sinner to saint, from dead in trespasses and sins to alive in Christ, united to Christ. Then and now this is not satan plundering satan, but God plundering satan. The stronger one binding the one stronger than us to set us free from our bondage to sin and unite us in God. God *uniting* to conquer.

Which is the **second** thing Jesus says here. When the people said that His mother and brothers had come and were looking for Him, ***looking about at those who sat around him, [Jesus] said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."*** Jesus wasn't dissing His family by saying that, but expanding it. For Jesus came to bring all people into His family. To re-unite what satan had divided. In Himself. And how? Well, He says, ***whoever does the will of God*** and so part of Jesus' family, are those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. For the will of God is that we *believe in the one He has sent* (John 6:29). And so we are children of God, not because of what we do, but by grace through faith. By grace through faith we are *united* as brothers and sisters in Christ. And so again, Jesus is **uniting to conquer** - uniting us in Himself, to conquer satan and his kingdom.

And maybe where we see that in its greatest and highest **is on the cross**. For there is where Jesus hangs in the place of all people. There Jesus hangs with the sins of all people - everyone who ever lived and ever will live. There Jesus hangs as all of humanity, all united in Himself as He takes the wrath and punishment of all, to redeem all. There, on the cross, is where every person can look and say: *there is God for me*. Bruising satan's head while being bruised Himself. Because Jesus was there giving Himself for each and every person, including you. That each and every person be His brothers and sisters. All united to Him in His death, that all be united to Him in His life from the dead. **The cross is God uniting to conquer**.

Which is why Jesus also includes words about the Holy Spirit in this context. At first listen it sounds like Jesus died for all the sins of all the world . . . *except one*: ***blaspheming against the Holy Spirit***. That seems to be the worst sin of all, sometimes called "the unforgiveable sin." But it is unforgiveable not because it is worse than any other sin and every other sin, but because it is the sin that refuses and shuns forgiveness. It's not that it *will* not be forgiven; it's that it *can*not be forgiven. For without the Holy Spirit we cannot believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Without the Holy Spirit we cannot confess that Jesus is our Saviour (1 Corinthians 12:3). To say that Jesus has an unclean spirit is rejecting the *uniting* work of the Holy Spirit to point you to Jesus as the Son of God in human flesh. And so that divides you from Jesus. Only the work of the Holy Spirit *unites* you to Jesus and His work of

forgiveness and life.

So in that house that day, in Jesus' hometown, we see both division and unity. **The division worked by unbelief, and the unity worked by faith**. Divison and unbelief that are the tools of satan; unity and faith that are the works of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So what about this house here today? What about your houses and homes? Your families, friends, neighbors, workplaces, and schools? Are there people you are divided from? People that you avoid? Hard feelings, grudges, or feuds? Divisions that you know of but really don't want to address? Because it's easier not to, right? To just ignore them and hope they will go away, or get better by themselves. But they rarely do. We just remain divided . . . and grow farther apart . . . and become hardened in our positions.

So how important for us to remember . . .
**Divide and conquer is the devil's strategy.**
**<u>Unite</u> and conquer is God's way.**

And so it is when we come to this altar. Jesus says that if you know your brother has something against you, go reconcile, and *<u>then</u>* come. Come in unity and peace. Come in repentance and receive forgiveness, the healing medicine that we need. Forgive one another as you have been forgiven. See each others not as people we are different from or divided from, but as people for whom Jesus died; people He wants to unite to Himself and so unite *with us* in Himself.

It's hard to look at people that way, isn't it? Maybe we just see what we want to see. See good in ourselves and something less than that in them. That would be something we need to repent of, wouldn't it? And ask the Holy Spirit not only for forgiveness - which He has promised! so yes, you are forgiven! - but also to change our hearts - to see ourselves rightly, and to see others as those for whom Jesus died in love.

I always think that the readings for this first "regular" Sunday in the Pentecost season set the tone for the whole season. And today that would be the unity we have in Jesus, that by grace through faith He has made us His brothers and sisters, and that He desires this unity for all people in Him. And to think about how He might be using *<u>you</u>* to that end. Using *<u>you</u>* in His work of uniting, reconciling, and forgiving.

This is what St. Paul was encouraging the Corinthian Christians. A church that needed uniting, if any any did! ***We believe, and we speak***, he said. Certainly pastors do that, preaching and teaching. But you speak, too, in the places and in the vocations where your heavenly Father has put you. You believe and you speak. You live what you believe.

You believe that you are a sinner and speak - confessing your sins here, but also asking forgiveness from those you have wronged.

You believe that you are forgiven - you hear that here in the Absolution, and you live that forgiveness in joy and freedom, and in speaking it to those who have sinned against you.

You believe that there is a unity among us in Christ, and so you strive to maintain that unity in the bond of peace, and speak to others, that they, too, have this unity with us.

And that while this ***outer nature is wasting away***, and divisions remain among us - sometimes because of us, and sometimes in spite of our best efforts - we ***do not lose hope!*** Because in the midst of this world and all that we can see, there remains what is unseen; what is eternal. And the afflictions we are going through now, Paul says, are ***preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison***. And notice: preparing for <u>us</u>. *Plural*. Together. <u>Not</u> me, separate, individual. But us, united together in Christ. United here in our afflictions, and united in eternity in joy. The Body of Christ, suffering together, rejoicing together, but always <u>*together*</u>. In Jesus. The stronger man who has come to bind the strong man and set us free. Free in the forgiveness of our sins. Free to live as children of God, and brothers and sisters of Christ.

Which is just as true today as it was when Jesus spoke those words. And if He were here today, Jesus would look out over this congregation and say: ***Here are my mother and my sisters and brothers!*** And you are. Baptized, forgiven, fed. United by Christ, united in Christ, your Saviour. A kingdom that is united *in the one* risen from the dead, victorious over death and the grave and all the powers of hell, and so a kingdom that will never fall.

United in Christ.
**Unite and conquer**.
That's God's way.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.