

"Unity"

John 17:20-21

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Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2009

Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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.

The Outer Banks of the Hatteras National Seashore are at the ocean's edge. No well-defined boundary marks where sea ends and land begins. Shifting banks of sand ridges are hidden beneath a turbulent sea.

The Outer Banks are a series of long, thin islands off the coast of North Carolina. They extend for hundreds of miles. It was on these banks that the first English settlement of the New World was established in 1586¹.

The treacherous waters that lie off the coast of the Outer Banks are called the 'Graveyard of the Atlantic.' This area is famous for shipwrecks. This stretch of coastline has the dubious distinction of having had the most shipwrecks of the entire Atlantic seaboard. Some historians cite hundreds of wrecks; others say there have been thousands. We'll never really know. Many of the shipwrecks occurred before the era of lighthouses, modern charting, or sonar.

Of course, where there are shipwrecks, there have to be ships, and where there are ships, there are crews, passengers, and sometimes even stowaways. Throughout history, the Christian Church has often been described as a ship. Ships are complex. Ships are

¹ On the island of Roanoke, N.C.

generally large. Ships depend upon a crew, a captain, a course. Like the church, it is hard to quickly turn a ship around. The metaphor is apt.

Today we here at LHPC celebrate several events. First and foremost, we celebrate the Lord's Day. We come together as we do every week, mates of the Good Ship LHPC, to worship and pray, to share and to learn. Many of the core crew report every single week. Many others come often. Some are less regular. All are friends.

Second, we celebrate the tenth anniversary of LHPC's christening as a unique congregation, the joining of three smaller boats and their crews ten years ago. What were once three small barks is now a stronger, larger vessel, fitted (God willing!) to move into 21st century waters.

Finally, today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost along with the largest ship, the Mother Church. Pentecost is when the Christian Church was launched in a rush of wind, flame, and prophetic words.

It is sad to have to admit on such a celebratory day that the unity which God so desired for us has become marred. Not long after that first Pentecost, after the amazing feat of so many hearing the good news spoken in their native tongue², the harmony of the earliest believers became disturbed in dissent. The church has struggled with disharmony ever since.

This morning I disembark from some of Max Lucado's musings about the ship that is the church.

Lucado says, *"God has enlisted us in his navy and placed us on his ship. The boat has one purpose---to carry us safely to the other shore."*

In this I disagree with Lucado, much as I respect him. I believe the boat has more than one purpose, actually, the far, elusive shore

² Some say Pentecost was a 'reverse Babel' event. All divisions centered in disparate languages were erased as the message was communicated in such a way that each person, from all over the world, understood the message as if their own mother had spoken it directly to them!

being but one of the many purposes God had in mind for the church. The church is also sent to seek out new worlds and new civilizations (in the immortal words of the Captain's Log of the Starship Enterprise!). The church is sent to navigate the reefs, to avoid the hidden and not so hidden dangers that beset us just about everywhere we turn. The boat is commissioned with the rescue of persons who need help, survivors of the shipwrecks of their own lives, desperately waiting to be plucked from a raging sea.

Lucado continues (and in this I wholly agree with him), *"This is no cruise ship; it's a battleship. We aren't called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service. Each of us has a different task. Some, concerned with those who are drowning, are snatching people from the water. Others are occupied with the enemy, so they man the cannons of prayer and worship. Still others devote themselves to the crew, feeding and training crew members."*

"Though the battle is fierce, the boat is safe, for our captain is God. The ship will not sink. For that, there is no concern. There is concern, however, regarding the disharmony of the crew. When we first boarded we assumed the crew was made up of others like us. But as we've wandered these decks, we've encountered curious converts with curious appearances. . . . [but] the variety of [appearance] is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions."³

Lucado goes on to draw out this word picture of ship and crew, talking about those who congregate around the bow, and those who prefer the stern. Those who stay up on deck, letting the wind blow through their hair, and those who spend all their time working below deck, getting their hands greasy and their fingernails stained with the nuts and bolts of all that is necessary in the engine room.

Undoubtedly, the ones in the crow's nest and those in the bowels of the ship see things from different perspectives.

And so it is with boats, both big and small. So it is with the church that is the small ship, navigating the waters of the local neighborhood. There are those on board who merely want to stay in the harbor, and those who insist that while ships are safe in harbors, *harbors are not what ships are made for.*

There are those who favor charting entirely new courses, while

³ Max Lucado, 'Rocking the Boat', an excerpt from *The Grip of Grace*.

others threaten to lower the lifeboats if the officers don't stick to the time-worn maps.

Some say we should have no officers. Some say we all should be officers. And there are sailors who just don't seem to care, one way or the other.

As it is with the small ships, so it is amplified with the big ship, the Mother Church. Here the skirmishes amidships may be even more intense. Mutiny is threatened. Secret plots brew behind locked cabin doors. Pirates prey while sentries sleep at their posts.

What the rest of the world sees are Christians bickering about the truth of the Bible, the place of science, the sanctity of life, politics, interfaith relations, the ordination of individuals who may or may not be homosexual, and what exactly constitutes a covenant relationship. Sailors cluster with those of like mind. Officers dismiss those with whom they disagree. Lines of communication break down. From the outside looking in, it seems no one is in charge. It seems everyone is wrestling for control.

And, most gravely, it seems God has abandoned ship.

It doesn't take a military genius to see this is no way to run a ship. This is no way to carry out a mission. The boat rocks this way and that. It runs out of steam; it runs aground; it wrecks.

Our divisiveness grieves God and sabotages God's ship and God's mission. When we reject God's will for us, when we fail to seek unity in Christ, our very faith risks shipwreck, a disaster just as certain as that which befell the thousands of unnamed vessels who ran aground on the Outer Banks, vessels lost in storms at sea, vessels who had no lighthouse, no sonar, no help, no Light, to guide them.

Well, all is not lost! There are ships that are not so divided! The entire armada is not under siege! There are those times when crew and officers work together in tandem and the ship races along its course, running with efficiency and beauty, its flags snapping proudly in the wind, its missions accomplished with grace and goodwill. These are the times when crews race toward distant destinations with force and focus.

There are those ships whose crews have wrestled through their diversity in faith to discover their unity in Christ. LHPC is one of these

fortunate ships. Here we celebrate our differing tasks and appreciate every member of the crew, from grease monkey to admiral. Here we have officers who are so talented, or so charismatic, so open to grace that God's Spirit envelops the entire ship like an aura. (Remember, the word charismatic comes from the Greek word *charis*, which means grace.) With God's Spirit blowing the sails, this ship is unstoppable!

These are the times when crew and officers achieve the unity Jesus so fervently prayed for. These are the times when the church embodies the true spirit of Pentecost, which is the Spirit of unity. Unity in purpose. Unity in will. And most important, unity in Christ.

It is not for ourselves, or for our ship, or even for our mission that we seek and nurture unity. It is so the world might believe, and in the believing, be saved.

It is life or death. Sink or swim. With God's help, we will find our way past the sandbars and reefs of divisiveness, the storms and the pirates that rob us of unity. Come aboard!