Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

This pandemic has put pressure on all of us. We are seeing that pressure is wearing thin at times. We see it in our own personal situation, in our communities, in our states and certainly on the nightly news in our country and in the world.

Each one of us in one form or another, are feeling “pandemic pressure.”

Just this week I was meeting with a couple intending to be married in June. These two incredibly optimistic, enthusiastic young adults were feeling the strains of this pandemic pressure. They had planned their life around their wedding date and now that date has been postponed for over a year. You could see the stress and strain, even as they were trying to smile and keep positive. But they were grieving the postponement of their most sacred event. And it’s hard. They were asking the question that many of us are asking “What do we do now?”

The disciples were struggling with these same feelings as Jesus’ departure was foretold and now approaching. They too were feeling the stress of what life would look like after Jesus was gone. When no promise of an advocate, no preparing a place for them, no not leaving them orphaned would completely wipe away the worry that they were now feeling nor the concern they were experiencing. I am sure underneath of the disciples’ uncertainty around Jesus’ departure, they were probably also asking “What do we do now?”

Jesus responds to them, and I think he responds to us as well. Jesus concludes his farewell discourse to his disciples by ending with a short succinct prayer that is simple in content, Jesus prays that all his disciples would be one, unified, working together for God’s purpose. Jesus understood the extreme pressure that his departure would leave on his followers. Pressure could easily divide his followers so Jesus prays for their unity. And as we face growing pressures during this pandemic, acts of unity and solidarity are that which would keep us whole, secure and strong.

We see around us artists, musicians, educators and first responders and families seeking to find a common bond while physically distancing and keeping isolated as a way to love the most vulnerable in our communities.

Communities are doing great work at nightly celebrations for health care workers and first responders. Buildings lit up with encouraging messages. Parades of teachers visiting the homes of all their students. Parades of families and friends moving through communities celebrating significant birthdays at a physical distance.

Here at St. Luke’s, the church bells peal for a minute every day at 3 p.m. to remember our health care workers and first responders. Just last week a team of high school students and myself and Gerry Mears and Kim Hendee went out into our community placing signs in the front yards of our children so that they know they are missed and loved by their Sunday School.

The creative spirit that brings song together is seen through artists on on-line concerts and in some cases live venues like drive in theaters where physical distancing is possible. Last week Lionel Richie performed, for the first time in 30 years, the beautiful unity ballad that he and
Michael Jackson wrote, “We Are the World,” during a national telecast joined with voices of many recording artists, celebrating the unity that we share as a world during these most difficult times.

And the creativity of our church musicians will be on full display next week in our worship service, when we will hear the Pentecost hymn “O Day Full of Grace” sung by literally thousands of church people brought to us virtually by the gift of technology. It will be amazing. Don’t miss it!

That we may be one, unifying the people of God, being one in Christ, that is the prayer that Jesus prays at the end of his farewell discourse.

In today’s reading, Jesus implores the Father to protect us. Not only from harm but also division. Jesus’ ultimate desire for his disciples is unity. Jesus wants his followers to know the loving unity that he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Above all, Jesus prays that the church would be protected from anything that could pull us apart, that could build a wall between us, or that would set us one against another.

We the church may not feel very united right now since many of us can’t worship together, in person. However, there are many ways that we can see that God is keeping us united. We are being united in worship even in our distancing as we sit before our screens every Sunday. We gather together to pray and sing and to listen. We are being united by service. We will be having another emergency food drive in June directly following the Bottle Band’s large donation to the food pantry this month. Some people are using their sewing skills to make cheery pattern or logo masks in order to make personal protection a little less intimidating. I have been fortunate to receive many of these types of masks myself. We are being united in prayer, praying for our sick members each week in worship and having many of you email or text us asking “who are these people so that we can specifically pray for them in our own prayer life. And I have been listen to the stories from our kin-ship connectors who are communicating with all of our members going through the pages of our church directory. And there are some incredible stories of love and care that have emerged from that experience.

As I talked with the young couple this week, I could not answer their most important question, “what do we do now?” Only they will be able to answer that question. But I reassured them that they are not alone as they struggle with the question and they pursue the answer to it. I assured them that their parents, their family, their friends and their church will stand unified around them in any decisions that they make. And they will never be alone in their decision.

And we are not alone my friends. We pray for that unity among us too today. That unity with a spirit with God holding us and that will keep us whole, secure and strong even these most challenging times.

May God be with you. And may God keep us all well.
The peace of Christ which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.
Amen.