

Roman Catholic and Lutheran leaders cosigned a document on justification this month. It removed one of the main obstacles that has kept our churches separate for almost 500 years. It still hasn't brought us to the same communion table, but it's a step forward. Also this month Lutherans and Episcopalians have reached an agreement to share communion. The World Council of Churches is attempting to get all Christians to agree to the same date for Easter starting next year. As the millennium draws near it is encouraging that Christians are working at these issues. When Pope John Paul II issued his encyclical on the coming jubilee, he expressed frank hopes that the Holy Spirit would enter human history in a dramatic way in the year 2000. He is asking nations to forgive the debts of poorer countries in the spirit of jubilee. Perhaps we shall also see more unity among Christians.

The unity of Christians weighed heavily on the mind of St. Paul, as is evident in today's passage from his letter to the church at Philippi up in northeastern Greece. He's heard bad news about the early Christians. They're selfish, ambitious, and arrogant. Not a good way to follow Christ. Paul was in prison; there wasn't much he could do. So he begged them to build on the love, compassion, and sympathy that had to be there, and to look not after their own interests but after the interests of others. Paul then quoted a popular Christian hymn. It's as if he said, "Let's all turn to #11 in Worship II and sing together." The hymn has two verses. The first tells about the self-abasement of Christ; the second his exaltation. Jesus had everything; he was equal to God. But he didn't cling to that. He let go of his godhead and grasped a human form, lowering himself to become one like us -- no, lower than us: a slave, a person who practiced complete obedience, and accepted all the limitations of being human, including death, death on a cross. The second verse of the hymn sings of the exaltation of Christ. God raised him on high and gave him the name above every other name so that every knee on the earth, under the earth, and over the earth should bend, and even things without knees or with bad knees would use that name to give God praise. The name of Jesus Christ is Lord!

My sisters and brothers, Christian churches need to take on the mind of Jesus Christ, to humble ourselves before God and seek the unity that Paul requested. I don't know about your lives. I don't know where you need unity most. It might be in your family. It might be with your neighbor across the street. It might be with people in this church today. I don't know, but you do, you know where you need unity the most. The jubilee year is calling us to reconciliation, to let go of past hurts and help one another cross the threshold of the new millennium unfettered by resentment. To have unity, someone has to take the first step. Someone has to be humble, to take on the mind of Jesus Christ. Whatever needs to be done between now and the millennium, let us pledge ourselves to actions which end divisions, to actions which unite.