

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Easter 7B
May 16, 2021
John 17:11b-19

Christ Prays for His Disciples

“I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. . . .
17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:15, 17 ESV)

Dearly Beloved in Christ, our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord:

On the night our Lord Jesus was betrayed, He prayed to His Father – for Himself, for His disciples, and for all believers, including you and me. Today’s Gospel is a portion of His High-Priestly prayer in which He prays for His disciples. And as we listen to our Lord’s words today, we do so in light of our Lord’s ascension into heaven, which was celebrated this past Thursday, and Pentecost, which the Church celebrates next Sunday. Yet, Jesus prayed this prayer before all those events took place. He prayed for His disciples before He was taken from them by death and burial, and later by His ascension. And as we live in the time between our Lord’s ascension and the subsequent outpouring of the Spirit on the one hand, and our Lord’s return in glory and judgment on the other, we do well to hear what our Lord prays for us.

Our Lord prays that His disciples, including us, would be one. He prays for Christian unity. And why would Jesus pray such a prayer? Simply because He knew firsthand the dangers His disciples, would face. He knew the temptations which would confront them and lead to disunity.

Certainly the devil would be there. Jesus had faced Satan head on and had withstood the full strength of the devil’s power. Yet, He never gave in. But Satan would continually try to drive a wedge between the disciples and Jesus, especially after Jesus was no longer with them visibly. The devil would continually raise doubt within the disciples about what Jesus said. The devil would do whatever he could to drive a wedge between the disciples as well. That’s why Jesus specifically asks His Father to keep them from the evil one. And we need His prayer too. For if the devil could deceive one of Jesus’ disciples, if Satan could convince one of those chosen by Jesus and closest to Him to betray Him, we should not deceive ourselves about our own ability to withstand the same assaults. Indeed, we should take heed lest we fall (1 Cor. 10:12).

And if being assaulted by the devil wasn’t enough, the disciples would also face opposition from the world. They had already seen how the world opposed Jesus. They had seen how the Pharisees and teachers of the law were always angry with Jesus over what He did and taught. So too, Christ’s disciples would face such opposition. The world would hate them just as the world hated Jesus. Indeed, we live in a world which declares that truth is in the eye of the beholder, that there is no right and wrong, only what is right or wrong *for me*. But that’s not

the worst of it. The world hates us for holding to God's Word which tells us that God made each of us male or female, that marriage is between one man and one woman for life, that the child in the womb is a precious life, and, in short, that all people are thoroughly sinful and in need of a Savior. Indeed, the world violently attacks any who don't applaud and approve of their sin and celebrate it. The world attacks all who believe God's Word that says there is only one true God, that being the Triune God, and that there is only one path of salvation, that being the Lord Jesus, God's only-begotten Son. The world is against those who deny salvation by works and those who claim that only Christians will be saved. Most certainly, the world is opposed to those who say that all who reject Christ and His saving work have a false religion, worship a false god, and will go to hell. Yes, the world is firmly against those who bear Jesus' Name and hold to the Truth of God's Word.

Then of course, there are the temptations to disunity we have and create within ourselves. We don't want to listen to God's Word. We want to live our lives however we want, without considering what God (or anyone else) has to say. At heart, we are sinful, selfish idolaters who want things only our way. And this leads to disunity. Consider the time when James and John asked for the places of honor when Jesus came into His kingdom. Jesus had to correct not only those two, but all the disciples. Our own sinfulness leads to similar disunity, and of this we need to repent.

So Jesus prays that His disciples would be one even as He and His Father are one. But this is no mere outward unity. It is not a unity based on an agreement to disagree. Rather it is a unity which can only take place through the Name and Word of God. It's a unity that believes, teaches, and confesses the same Christ and in that common confession, receives the same gifts. It's a unity in the truth of God's Word which alone is Truth. In the world, though, we see Christianity like breakfast cereal, which comes in an endless variety of flavors to suit a wide array of tastes. Yet, there is only one saving faith and that faith is deeply rooted in the Person and work of Jesus Christ who was crucified for our sins, raised for our justification, enthroned in majesty at the right hand of God, Who's truly present as the God-man for us in the preaching of His Gospel Word and also in the distribution of His Sacraments. That's the unity for which Jesus prays - that we might be one in Him just as He and the Father are one.

And the reason Jesus prays for such unity is not for Himself, but for our sake. He wants us to know the joy that is His, and He wants us to have it in full measure. And what is Christ's joy? Living in perfect communion with His Father. Indeed, Jesus was united with His Father by nature. He was and is true God. And even now He lives in joy with His Father in heaven. Jesus is the one "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). Our High Priest, who sacrificed Himself for our sins, has now ascended to His heavenly throne to continue to be with us and continue interceding for us.

And as the Father and the Son are united by nature, so we are united to the Father and the Son by grace. And more than that, in Christ we have become united with each other. And that unity is created and maintained only by God's Word. Indeed, as God's Word is connected with the

water of Holy Baptism, we are made members of Christ's Body and God's family. And this solely out of God's great love for us in Christ. For in that holy washing we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection. All that He did, He did for us, so that our sins would be forgiven and that we might spend eternity with Him.

But that's not all that He has done for us. He also gives us His Holy Gospel, His Holy Absolution, and His Holy Supper to sustain and keep us in saving faith. Even as we hear His Word of Law and are thus terrified of our sins and the threat of being separated from Him forever, we then flee to His boundless mercy in the Gospel to receive comfort and strength. As we come to know our sins and repent of them, we are certain of our Savior's love and readiness to forgive us. That's why we keep coming back here each week. We need to constantly use the means by which our Father keeps us united with Him. We need to constantly use the gifts He has given us to keep us united with one another. Indeed, after receiving our Lord's very Body and Blood, we pray, "we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and *in fervent love toward one another*."

Jesus' desire, dear child of God, is that you be eternally with Him even as He's now with you, and that the Father's love, through Him, might dwell in you forever. Because that's the ultimate goal of Jesus' prayer, you need to know that our Lord Christ will continue lifting up His wounded hands unceasingly as your High Priest as He displays the wounds of His sacrifice, and intercedes on your behalf before the Father. For now, though, He sends you out into the world protected by His Name, made holy by His Word, and sustained by His constant prayer: "Keep them in Your name which You have given Me," He prays, "Keep them from the evil one, and sanctify them in the Truth of Your Word." This is the prayer that will sustain and preserve you until the Day you rise from the dead to eternal life on the Day of His coming - that day when you will fully see and know the glory and the power of this high priestly prayer that only Jesus can pray and that, for your sake and eternal well-being. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener