

## JESUS PRAYS FOR YOU

John 17:11b-19

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Series B)

May 13, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Seventh Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 17. The appointed verses are 11b through 19, but I'm going to read through verse 20 so that you can see that Jesus is praying, not just for his eleven disciples, but also for you. It is on page 766 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 17, beginning in the middle of verse 11, we read in Jesus' name.

“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. <sup>12</sup> While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. <sup>13</sup> But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. <sup>14</sup> I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>15</sup> I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup> They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup> And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

<sup>20</sup> “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

**He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

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So where is he? If Jesus is alive—and based on the historical records, we insist that he is—where is he? Jesus did not die again. His resurrected body is incorruptible and immortal. He cannot die again. Jesus rose from the dead and still lives. So where is he?

According to the historical record in the gospels and in the book of Acts, he ascended into heaven forty days after his resurrection. We call this the Ascension, and the Church observes it forty days after Easter, which would have been on Thursday. But since we didn't gather for worship on Thursday, we'll mention something about it here, because it is a significant event.

Jesus' physical body was taken up from the earth and into heaven. We won't try to speculate where exactly heaven is. Whether it's somewhere in our physical universe or in some other realm, we can't say, and we won't try to speculate. But we do know that Jesus' physical body is now in heaven. This is what we confess in the Apostles' Creed. And I have to read this from my notes, because it's really hard to recite part of the Apostles' Creed without starting at the beginning.

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The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, And is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From where He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

So that's where Jesus is now, and there are a whole bunch of Scripture passages that talk about Jesus sitting at the "right hand" of the Father—too many to list (e.g., Ps. 110:1; Mark 14:62; Acts 2:33; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 10:12; etc.).

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Now it might sound kind of like bad news that Jesus ascended into heaven. It seems like faith would be a little bit easier if Jesus were still on earth. He could heal people, he could still teach us, and he could prove himself by performing miracles. It seems like, if he were still here, he could alleviate our doubts. But Jesus' ascension is not bad news. It's actually good news. It is better for us that he has ascended into heaven. And I'll give you three primary benefits of Christ's ascension.

The first benefit is that Jesus has opened heaven to mankind. Think about this: a man now lives in heaven, not just spiritually, but also physically. By his crucifixion, Jesus earned the forgiveness of our sins. By his resurrection, he demonstrated his power over death and secured our resurrection from the dead. And by his ascension into heaven, he has opened heaven for all believers. So now we are seated with him in heaven spiritually (Eph. 2:6), and we also have assurance that we will live in heaven with him both spiritually and physically. And this is a big deal. We will not live in heaven as some disembodied spirits. We will live in heaven as complete persons, with bodies and souls, just as Jesus is now.

The second benefit is that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). This is what it means that he is seated at the right hand of the Father. When we talk about Jesus being seated at the right hand of the Father, we're not talking about a physical location. Jesus' human body is physically located in heaven, and we never want to deny that. But the "right hand" refers to his position of authority, not his location. If you talk about your boss at work having a "right hand man," that's the guy whom your boss trusts with pretty much everything. The "right hand" refers to a position of authority. It means that God the Father has placed everything in heaven and on earth under the feet of Jesus (Ps. 8:6; 1 Cor. 15:27). So we have a friend in high places, and this is good for us.

And the third benefit is that he is always with us. So when we say that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, that does not mean he is absent from us. In fact, the opposite is true. Because Jesus is at the right hand of the Father and exercises authority over all of heaven and earth, we have confidence that he is with us. His body is physically located in heaven, but he is with us spiritually at all times, and he is physically with us in the Lord's Supper. We know this, because Jesus promises this, and if he has all authority in heaven and on earth, then he can make it happen.

And this is the part that seems a little bit backward ... until we think about it a bit deeper. In one of Martin Luther's ascension sermons, he said,

"Beware lest you imagine within yourself that [Jesus] has gone, and now is, far away from us. The very opposite is true: While he was on earth, he was far away from us; now he is very near." (*The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 2.1, 191).

The point is this: since Jesus has ascended into heaven, he exercises his divine omnipresence—that is, his ability to be everywhere at all times. There is nowhere you can go where Jesus is not with you.

So we might long for his visible presence with us on earth. And this would be good. I would love to sit down with you and listen to Jesus preach. But his ascension into heaven is even better, because now he is present with all Christians in all places and at all times.

To stand and preach in one place or to sit and rule over one nation—that would be too little of a thing for our Savior-King. When he took the form of a servant, he confined himself to one place. And that was right for a time. But now he has ascended to the highest place, so that he might exercise dominion over everything in heaven and on earth.

So now that Christ has ascended, every place where the Gospel is preached in his name, it is truly Jesus Christ himself who preaches to us. Every time a person is baptized into Jesus Christ, it is truly Jesus himself who does the baptizing. Every time we take bread and wine according to his institution, it is truly his body and blood. And instead of ruling over one small nation on earth, he rules over all creation.

We may think that while he was on earth he was near to us, and now that he has ascended he is far from us. But, in fact, the exact opposite is true. While he was on earth he was far from us, for he confined himself to one location. But now that he has ascended into heaven, he is nearer to us than ever, for he has ascended to fill all things.

So remember these three benefits: One, Jesus has opened heaven to mankind. Two, He exercises authority over all things. And, three, he is with us always.

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And this morning I want to focus in on one of these benefits, or, really, just part of one of them. It's related to the benefit that Jesus is seated on the Father's right hand. And remember, this has to do with Jesus' authority. Sitting at the Father's right hand means that Jesus has the Father's ear. And what does Jesus do when he has the Father's ear? He prays for you. The book of Hebrews says that "[Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Intercession is a fancy word that means "prayer." And it's a special priestly kind of prayer.

A priest is a person who mediates between God and man. So in the Old Testament they had priests who were consecrated to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. The people couldn't have direct access to God, because his presence is holy and the people were unholy. But then Jesus came and offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice. He is the great high priest who offered himself as an atonement for sins (Heb. 7:27). So he has cleansed all who believe in him, and we have access to the Father through him. So now, in the New Testament, all believers are considered priests (1 Peter 2:9). All of us have access to the Father through Jesus Christ. This, by the way, is why we call our clergy "pastors" instead of "priests." You already are a priest. You don't need anyone other than Jesus to plead for your forgiveness. So instead of priests, Jesus sends shepherds—that's what the word "pastor" means—to watch over and serve his flock.

So Jesus is your high priest, and as your high priest, he prays for you. Sometimes people come and say, "Pastor, can you pray for me?" And this is good. I am happy when people do this, and I gladly pray for them. I already pray for you anyway, so it helps me to know what to pray for. But I hope no one thinks that God hears my prayers more than he hears yours. All believers have the same access to God. And it's not like God holds back on answering our prayers until

we have enough people praying. I cringe a little bit when people say, “We just need to get more people to pray for this particular need,” because God doesn’t work like that. God is actually much nicer than we sometimes give him credit for. He does not hold back as if we need to reach a minimum number of prayers. He delights to hear your prayers because he is your loving heavenly Father. And even if no one else is praying for you, Jesus prays for you. “He always lives to make intercession for [you].”

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So when Jesus prays for us, what sorts of things does he pray for? We got a sample of it in the gospel lesson. This is often called Jesus’ “high priestly prayer.” Here Jesus prays for our sanctification and our protection.

I think we understand the meaning of the word protection well enough. Jesus prays that God the Father would keep us from the evil one. This is a lot like what Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “**Deliver us from evil**” (Matt. 6:13). This protection has to do with both body and soul. The devil would love to destroy us, and if it were not for God’s gracious protection, he would. So Jesus prays that God the Father would protect us from all manner of evil. And since Jesus is perfectly pure and knows God’s will completely, we are confident that it is God’s will to protect us from the evil one.

And Jesus also prays that the Father would sanctify us. Now “sanctify” is one of those stuffy theological words, so I should try to define it for you. To “sanctify” means “to make holy.” But it turns out that “holy” is also one of those theological words—just a little bit less stuffy—so I should define that too. It means “to set apart.” So when God sanctifies us, he sets us apart for his purposes. It’s kind of like when you put your fine china in a separate cabinet. You set it apart for a special occasion. So as you’re doing this, you can say to your fancy gravy boat, “I sanctify you for Thanksgiving Dinner.” It means that you set it apart for that special purpose.

This idea comes up a lot in the Old Testament. The priests set aside certain vessels and utensils for service in the temple. There were special bowls, and stands, and all sorts of things that weren’t to be used for common purposes. They were set apart, or consecrated, or sanctified for use in the temple. And certain animals were set apart for the sacrifices. The best animals were picked from among the flock and consecrated for sacrifice.

This is the kind of consecration Jesus means when he says, “**And for their sake I consecrate myself**” (17:19). Some translations say, “**I sanctify myself,**” instead of, “**I consecrate myself.**” And this is better because the word is the same as when Jesus prays, “**Sanctify them in the truth,**” and, “**That they also may be sanctified in the truth.**” So it’s, “**For their sake I set myself apart, that they also may be set apart in the truth.**”

And we remember that Jesus is praying this on the night before his crucifixion. In fact, as soon as Jesus finished praying this, he went with his disciples to the garden where Judas came to betray him (18:1-2). Just like all those animals in the Old Testament, for our sake, Jesus was consecrated as the sacrifice for the sin. But this is different from all those animals, because there was no priest who consecrated Jesus for this. In fact, the priests of Israel rejected and condemned him. So Jesus consecrated himself as the sacrifice for sins, and he offered himself as a willing sacrifice. No one took his life from him; he laid it down of his own accord (10:18). In this sacrifice he is both the priest and the victim.

Jesus did this—he consecrated and sacrificed himself—for our sake, so that we might be set apart, not to die, but to live. The purpose is that we might be set apart—or, “sanctified”—in the truth.

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So when God sanctifies us, what does he set us apart for? He sets us apart as his own. We do not belong to the world, and we do not belong to the devil; we belong to God. We become his own dear children in order that we might inherit eternal life, live forever in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. He set us apart to inherit heaven. This means that we are no longer of the world. We used to be. But we are not anymore. We have been sanctified, or “set apart,” from the world.

But that doesn’t mean we are not in the world. And Jesus does not pray that God would take us out of the world. He prays instead that the Father would protect us from the evil one, that is, the devil, who is sometimes called “the ruler of this world” (e.g., 16:11).

So God leaves us in the world, but he sanctifies us for his purposes. And this is where good works come into sanctification. Too often when Christians talk about sanctification it’s very moralistic—as if we sanctify ourselves by our own good works. This is impossible. We cannot make ourselves more holy. It is God who sanctifies us, and one of the things he sanctifies us for is good works. Just like the priests in the Old Testament sanctified the bowls and stands and utensils for service in the temple, so God sanctifies us for his special purposes.

And he does this through his Word. This is that part of Jesus’ prayer that we modify for our own purposes at the beginning of every sermon when we pray, “Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth; your Word is truth” (17:17).

I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed this, but it seems kind of strange sometimes using that prayer when the entire Scripture reading is the words of Jesus. And then we pray, “Father, these are your words.” It seems like maybe we should say, “Jesus, these are your words,” instead. But it’s still right to say, “Father, these are your words,” even when they come from Jesus’ lips, because everything Jesus spoke is what the Father gave him to speak (17:8).

So Jesus prays that God the Father would sanctify us through his Word. And we continue to pray the same thing. So when we pray those words, we are asking God the Father to use those holy words and the following explanation to set us apart for his purposes. We pray that we might be set apart to receive eternal life and be used as his instruments in this world to do good works.

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On the night in which Jesus was betrayed, he prayed for you. And this is what he prayed for: your protection and your sanctification. Then he sanctified himself as a sacrifice for our sins, and he offered himself in our place. So his blood cleanses us from all sin and sets us apart as God’s dear children. Then he rose from the grave, and on the fortieth day he ascended into heaven. And now, among the many things he does as our great high priest, he prays for you.

So with every sin we commit, when the devil accuses us, think of this: Jesus’ blood pleads your case in heaven. And your high priest in heaven says to the Father, “Forgive them, protect them, and sanctify them.” And God the Father says, “Yes. This is my gracious will.” And with every need we face in this world, whether it affects body or soul, when you are worried, and you’re just not sure if things are going to be okay, Jesus pleads for you. And the Father says, “Yes. This is my gracious will.” So he delights to give us everything needed for this life, and he

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preserves us that we might reach the next. Your Jesus prays for you, and his prayer is always in perfect harmony with the will of your heavenly Father. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.