

ONE IN THE ASCENDED CHRIST

John 17:20-26

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Series C)

June 2, 2019

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, verses 20 through 26. It is on page 766 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus prays for his disciples, and not merely those who were his disciples at the time, but for all those who would believe through their word, which even includes those today who believe. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 17, beginning at verse 20, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁰ "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

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!

So where is he? Jesus rose bodily from the grave. He was dead, and then he wasn't. So then what happened? Did he just live out the rest of a normal-length life and then die again? No; if he did that there would be a grave somewhere, but there isn't. Jesus didn't die again; he continues to live forever. So where is he? If Jesus is still alive today, you would think that we would at least see him on TV. Maybe he would have a podcast or something, or maybe he would go on tour so that we could all hear him preach in person. That would be pretty cool. But that's not how it is. So why not? If Jesus is alive today, why don't we see him?

If you remember the Apostles' Creed, then you know the answer: "He ascended into heaven, And is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." There's the answer: we don't see him, because he ascended into heaven.

This occurred on the fortieth day after his resurrection. In the liturgical calendar it was this last Thursday. It doesn't get its own Sunday, because it always falls on a Thursday, but it's really a significant event, so it's important to say something about it now.

The biblical account is recorded, most notably, at the end of *The Gospel According to Luke* (24:50-53) and at the beginning of *The Acts of the Apostles* (1:6-11). The disciples watched as Jesus was lifted up from the earth on a cloud and out of their sight. Then two men in white robes, probably angels, told them that Jesus would come again, in the same way he was taken up (Acts 1:9-11).

Now, if someone is skeptical about Christianity, they might say, “Oh, well that’s convenient. You claim Jesus is still alive, but you just can’t see him, because he went up into heaven.” Someone might see this as a convenient excuse, except for the fact that the ascension didn’t occur right away. There was a period of forty days after his resurrection and before the ascension when Jesus appeared to hundreds of eyewitnesses, presenting many proofs and preaching about the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:3-8; Acts 1:1-3). That should be a long enough time and numerous enough eyewitnesses to confirm the resurrection as a historical event. So his ascension into heaven is not some convenient excuse his disciples made up about why we don’t see him.

Rather, Jesus’ ascension into heaven is one of the many things he does for our benefit. But you might think, *Well, how can that be? I would rather have him here on earth in visible form.* It seems like it would help our faith so much more if Jesus were still on earth in visible form.

For one thing, it seems like there would be no doubting his resurrection from the dead. There would be tangible, physical proof right in front of us all the time. No one would be able to disbelieve ... or so we might think. But Jesus has already given us enough proof, and people don’t believe. The problem with unbelief in the world is not a lack of proof. The problem is human nature. We, by human nature, do not believe, because, by human nature, we do not *want* to believe. The problem is not a lack of proof; the problem is fallen human nature.

There are several examples from the gospels of people who witnessed Jesus’ mighty works but did not believe in him. On one occasion Jesus fed five thousand men with five barley loaves and two fish (6:9-11). The people were amazed. But, the next day, Jesus said some things they didn’t really like, and most of them abandoned him (6:60, 66). There were even people who saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead who still did not believe in him (11:45-46). If people won’t believe when they see you raise someone from the dead, I don’t know what further proof you can give them. The problem is not a lack of proof; the problem is fallen human nature. So even if Jesus were still on earth in visible form, people would still disbelieve.

I also think of the unity of the Church, or, rather, the *disunity* of the Church. The Christian Church on earth is tragically divided. But it seems like having Jesus among us in visible form would fix this problem. He could settle all of our doctrinal differences and tell us to just let it go when we’re being petty. It would seem like Jesus’ visible presence would solve this problem. As we see Jesus praying in this lesson for the unity of the Church, it seems like his visible presence would help us to be unified. But, again, the real problem is human nature. It is not because of lack of clarity that we are divided. The Scriptures give us clear instruction on what we must believe. The primary reason for divisions in the Church is that we simply don’t want to believe what our Lord has already spoken. Again, throughout the gospels, we have examples of divisions among the disciples, even while Jesus is with them. One of the things they liked to argue about was who was the greatest (Luke 9:46; 22:14). On other occasions they absolutely refused to believe what Jesus taught them (Matt. 16:22). The problem is not a lack of clarity; the problem is fallen human nature. Even if Jesus were still on earth in visible form, the Church would still have divisions.

So the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven is not a bad thing. It is actually a good thing for us. I’ll give you three primary benefits of Jesus’ ascension.

First, he has opened heaven to mankind. Think about this: there is a human being, with a resurrected body, who lives in heaven. This is a big deal. When one of God’s children falls

asleep in Jesus Christ, their soul is taken by God into heaven. How exactly this works, I don't know, but from what Scripture teaches concerning this, we believe that their soul is in heaven while their body sleeps in the grave (e.g., Luke 23:43; Phil. 1:21-24; Rev. 20:4). This is good, but it is not the best thing. God's ideal is that we would live forever in perfection of body and soul with him in heaven. We know this is possible, because Jesus is doing it now, and we know it will happen, because Jesus has promised to bring us with him (14:3; 17:24). This is important. We will not live forever as disembodied souls. We will live forever in heaven as perfect human beings in both body and soul.

The second benefit is that Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). That's what it means that Jesus is at the Father's right hand. Some Christians take this to mean that Jesus is eternally sitting on the right side of the Father, like there is a throne with two seats, and they are both sitting there forever. And they say this is why Jesus can't be anywhere else, including the Lord's Supper. But this is really kind of silly. "The right hand of the Father" refers to Jesus' position of authority.

It's like if your boss has a "right hand man." It doesn't mean that this guy is always standing to the right of the boss, and the boss refuses to even let him stand on his left side. That would be silly. It simply means that the boss has given him authority, so when he comes and tells you to do something, you do it as if the boss himself had commanded you.

When we confess that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, we are simply confessing that he has all authority in heaven and on earth. The comfort here is that we have a friend in high places. Your advocate—your defender from the accusations of law—possesses all authority in heaven and on earth.

And the third benefit is that Jesus is always with us. This is the one that might seem kind of backward ... until we think about it and listen to Jesus' words. It seems like if Jesus were on earth in visible form he would be nearer to us, but that isn't actually true, because if he were on earth, he would be confined to one place. He might be in Israel one day, China another day, and Canada another day. You might try your entire life and never get within a hundred yards of him. But since Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, he exercises authority over all of heaven and earth. This means, among other things, that he has the power to be anywhere. And so he promises his disciples that he is "with [us] always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Because Jesus has ascended to the place of authority, he has power to be everywhere he has promised to be. So where two or three are gathered in his name, he is here among us (Matt. 18:20). In the elements of bread and wine, Jesus is bodily present, because he said, "This is my body," and, "This is my blood" (Mark 14:22, 24). And in the teaching and preaching of his Word, Jesus continues to be present as our teacher. So he says in this prayer, "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known" (17:20). Jesus does not stop teaching his disciples, even after his ascension. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to also be our teacher, but that doesn't mean Jesus is now absent from us. He promises that he will be in us, just as the Father is in him (17:23). That close, intimate fellowship Jesus has with the Father is what he promises to his Church.

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. 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.

Now we're going to focus a little more in depth on one of these benefits, because this is what is highlighted in the gospel lesson: Jesus is with us always. And it is not simply that Jesus is with us, but that he is in us, and we are in him. We are one with Christ. And Jesus prays for the unity of the Church.

This is part of Jesus' prayer in the upper room on the evening before his crucifixion. He prayed out loud for the sake of his disciples, so that they could learn from his prayer, and also for our sake. Jesus actually prayed for us that night. He says, **"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word"** (17:20). That includes you, and me, and all who believe in Christ through the word of the apostles. How marvelous is this? On the evening before Jesus' crucifixion, he was praying for you. He was about to face unimaginable anguish, and he knew it, but his Church is what was on his mind. That's because his Church was the reason he was going to the cross—to redeem us and purify us by his blood.

And he specifically prays that we might be unified. He prays that we might all be one, just as the Father is in Christ, and Christ is in the Father, that we also may be in them (17:21). This is one of the things Christ has accomplished by his death, resurrection, and ascension. He is crucified to cleanse us from our sins, he is raised from the dead to grant us new life, and he is ascended into heaven to be with us always. And so, as we are baptized into Christ, we are baptized into his death and resurrection, and we become one with him and one with one another.

Jesus does the work to make us one, but he also prays to the Father that we might be one, because there is still work to do. It is essential that we recognize these two truths concerning the unity of the Christian Church, and it is important to recognize both of them: first, that we are one in Christ, and second, that we are still divided in many ways, so there is much work to do.

The first truth we see revealed in Scripture. We are one in Jesus Christ. The unity of the Church is a reality to be realized. Christ has made us one. You are baptized into Christ, and so you are joined together with everyone else who is baptized into Christ.

The second truth we see revealed in the world. We are tragically divided. And it's not just the existence of many different denominations among Christians. That's not necessarily the problem. The problem is that there are so many different beliefs among these denominations and even within them. The teachings from one congregation to the next might be completely different. And often it's not just a matter of it being different, but the different teachings being completely opposed to one another. This is tragic and confusing. So the unity of the Church is also a goal to be worked toward.

This is one area where diversity is not to be celebrated. Our division has a negative effect on the advancement of the Gospel. Look at what Jesus prays: **"I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me"** (17:23). The unity of the Christian Church should reveal God's love for the world. But, as it is, the world looks at the Church and says, "They can't even figure out what they believe." This is not good.

So there are these two realities—our unity and our disunity—and we need to recognize both of them. Some churches will focus on the unity and say, "We're one in Christ, so let's put aside our differences and focus on what we do agree on." This leads to a watering down of Christian

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doctrine. If we all adopted this approach and only focused on what we agree on, the world would look at us and say, “Well, they figured out what they believe, but it isn’t much.”

On the other side, some churches will focus on the disunity and deny fellowship to everyone they disagree with, regardless of whether they have many differences or only a few. The result is that they treat other Christians as if they are not.

What we really need to do is recognize the unity we have in Christ while also honestly acknowledging the disunity that exists among us in the world. When we do this we can lovingly and constructively work toward increasing the unity within the Church on earth. We need to have some of those difficult and controversial discussions. There are issues we need to address, and we need to address them to fellow Christians. When you debate another Christian—and debates can be good!—recognize that this is your brother or sister in Christ. We are one. Even if we have deep disagreements on extremely significant issues, we are not enemies; we are one. We must recognize this, and we must also work for this.

Dear saints,

Jesus was crucified for you. He was raised from the dead for you. And he has ascended into heaven for you. We are baptized into the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. We are one in him. And we eat of one body and drink of one cup. We all partake of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, because he has ascended to fill all things. He comes to us now, and we are united in him.

And Jesus has promised that he will continue to teach us. He has made known to us the Father’s name, and he will continue to make it known. We are one in the ascended Christ, so may we continue to be built up together until that great and glorious day when Christ returns and perfects his bride, the Church, for all eternity. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, “**Surely I am coming soon.**” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)