

UNITY IN TRUTH

John 17:11b-19

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Series B)

May 12, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 17, verses 11b through 19. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 17, beginning at verse 11b, 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

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!

And Jesus has ascended into heaven. This is also good for us, though it might not be immediately obvious. I would very much like to see Jesus in the flesh, like the apostles and several hundred other eyewitnesses did. So I kind of wish Jesus had just stayed on earth instead of ascending. But my wish is wrong. Jesus always does what is right. And he always does what is best for us. So he has ascended to the right hand of the Father.

We have a few things to talk about today. We have this gospel lesson before us where Jesus prays for his disciples, including us. Today is also Mother's Day, so it is good and right to extol motherhood and to thank God for our mothers. But first, today is also the Sunday closest to Ascension Day.

We remember and celebrate the ascension of Jesus Christ forty days after Easter, which would have been Thursday of this past week. Being forty days after Easter, it always falls on a Thursday. But it's appropriate to spend at least sometime on the closest Sunday thinking about it, because it is a significant event in the work of Jesus Christ.

As we read from Acts 1 earlier, after Jesus rose from the dead, he did not immediately return to heaven. He remained on earth for forty days, appearing to his disciples and teaching them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). Then, at the end of those forty days, he was lifted up from their sight. Jesus was no longer with them in the same way that he was for those forty days or for the three years of ministry before his death and resurrection. But the disciples did not grieve. At the end of Luke's gospel, he records a short version of the ascension. There he says that the

disciples “returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (Luke 24:52). They did not grieve, because the ascension of Jesus is a good thing.

It may not seem that way when we first think about it. It seems that the Christian faith would be easier if Jesus had not ascended. Think about this: Jesus was never going to die again. If he had not ascended, he would still be alive here. He would be the oldest living man by about 1,900 years. That would be pretty cool. It would be perpetual evidence to us that he is the Son of God. Even if we didn’t get to meet him face to face, we would at least be able to see him on TV. It seems, at first, that many more people would be Christians if we had that living proof before our eyes. But that’s speculation, and it might not be right. His visible presence might actually have the opposite effect. During Jesus’ three-year ministry, he performed miracles in front of believers and unbelievers. They all saw the miracles. And Jesus’ opponents could not deny the miracles, but they did not trust him. Instead, they accused him of being from the devil (Matt. 12:24), and they were inspired to violence. It’s possible, and I think this is more likely, that, if Jesus had remained on earth in visible form, it only would have provoked this darkened world to more hatred and violence, because “people loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19). So we trust God that he knows what is right, and the ascension of Jesus is good for us.

So I’ll give you three big benefits of Jesus’ ascension into heaven. First, it opens heaven to mankind. Jesus did not give up his humanity. He lives forever as both God and man. So he went before us into heaven and he opens the gates of heaven to us.

The second benefit of the ascension is that Jesus rules over all things. This is what it means when the Bible talks about Jesus being seated at the right hand of the Father (Ps. 110:1; Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:25, 33-34; 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22). It’s not so much a statement about his physical location, as it is about his authority. To be at the right hand of the Father means that Jesus is subject to the Father, but he exercises authority over everything else in all of heaven and earth.

And the third benefit of Jesus’ ascension is that he is with us always. This is the one that might seem backward at first. We might think that if Jesus were present on earth in visible form, then he would be near to us. But that would only be true if he were visible in this specific space, and not somewhere else. But Jesus actually ascended in order to be with us always. He promised to be with us always, even “to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). And Ephesians 4:10 says that Jesus “ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.” He exercises his divine power at the right hand of the Father to be with us always. Some Christians say that Jesus cannot be physically present in the Lord’s Supper because his body is located at the right hand of the Father. But that’s wrong. It is precisely because Jesus is at the right hand of the Father that he can be with us always, including the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. The right hand of the Father is where Jesus exercises the divine attributes, including omnipresence. Being at the right hand of the Father is how Jesus is present with us always.

Jesus speaks of his ascension in this gospel lesson, at least partially. He speaks of going to the Father (17:13). All throughout chapters 13 through 17 of John, Jesus speaks of going to the Father. In chapters 13 through 16, he speaks to his disciples about it. Then in chapter 17 he prays to his Father about it. It’s not just about the ascension, though. The ascension is really just the last part of Jesus going to the Father. The important part is how Jesus went to the Father. If it was just about going to the Father, he could have just ascended there. But he did so much more.

Chapters 13 through 17 are Jesus’ words on the evening before his crucifixion. Throughout these chapters, he’s speaking of going to the Father by way of the cross. He goes through the

crucifixion and resurrection in order to make atonement for our sins, so that he can bring us with him to the Father.

As Jesus prepares for this exodus, he prays for his disciples. He prays that the Father would keep them in the faith (17:11), make them one (17:11), and sanctify them in the truth (17:17). And Jesus did not only pray this for those twelve apostles, but for all Christians. The reading for today stopped before this part, but in the very next verse Jesus says, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word” (17:20). That’s you, and me, and everyone who has come to trust in Jesus through the teaching of the apostles. There are a few places where Jesus makes a promise that is specifically for the apostles (e.g., John 14:26). So we should not always assume that everything Jesus says to his apostles automatically extends to us. That could be to take Jesus out of context. But in this case, Jesus clearly states that he is praying for us, because we are those who have come to believe through the words of the apostles. This prayer is for you.

The prayers of Jesus teach us the will of God. For example, consider the Lord’s Prayer. It’s more than just a prayer that we should pray. But in teaching us to pray those seven petitions, Jesus also reveals the heart of his Father. They are the seven things God desires to do for us. He desires for his Name to be hallowed among us. He desires for his Kingdom to come to us. He desires for his will do be done in our lives. He desires to give us our daily bread. He desires to forgive our sins. He desires to protect us from temptation. And he desires to deliver us from all evil. And when I say that these are the things the Father desires, I don’t mean that in the wishful thinking sort of way. But these things are his good and gracious will, so that, when we pray for these things, we can know that it is the will of God to do these things, and we should have confidence that he will accomplish his will in our lives.

So also, when Jesus prays for us in this passage, we can look at the specific things he prays for and learn the will of God. His will is perfectly aligned with the Father’s. They want the same things for us. And if this is God’s will, we can have confidence that he will bring it to completion.

We have a loving heavenly Father. He is attentive to us. He cares for us. He provides for us, protects us, and nurtures us. Good mothers and fathers on this earth are a dim reflection of our Father’s love. And when I call it a dim reflection, I’m not denigrating mothers and fathers. To be a dim reflection of the Father’s love is the highest honor on this earth. On this day, we especially consider the gift of motherhood. Most people have good mothers. There are more good mothers than there are good fathers. Every child should have both. Many have only one or the other. And some have neither. But every child should have both. To have a good mother is a gift from God. And, as great as a good mother is, they are a dim reflection of your heavenly Father’s all-surpassing love. This should be an encouragement to all of us. Maybe you have a good mother. Maybe you have a good father. If so, your heavenly Father is even greater. Maybe you have one or neither. You still have a strong, gentle, and loving Father in heaven. He has adopted you in Jesus Christ. He watches over you now. And he will bring you to himself in heaven. This should be an encouragement to all children.

It should also encourage parents, because your children have a Father who loves them even more than you do. Mothers worry about their children. Fathers worry too, but mothers worry more. We all know this to be true. Maybe that means that mothers love their children more. I don’t know. But I do know that every mother worries about her children. So dear Christian

mother, you have a heavenly Father who loves your children even more than you do. You love your children; your Father loves them more. You are strong; your Father is stronger. Your Father gives you what you need to care for your children; but he is still more able. So when you find the limits of your patience, strength, ability, and love, and you sin against your children, confess your sin to your Father, know that he forgives you for Jesus' sake, and trust that he still loves and keeps your children.

So when we read this prayer from Jesus, hear it as a prayer for you and for your children.

Jesus prays to his Father that he would keep us in the Father's Name. What does that mean? God's Name is his identity. It's everything about him: his attributes and his works. So it's not just the letters F-A-T-H-E-R or Y-H-W-H. But his Name is everything God has revealed about himself so that we would know him. In short, the Name of God is the entire doctrine of God. To be kept in the Father's Name, then, means that we would know all about him and that we would know him. That's all that doctrine is. It's just knowing about God, and knowing God.

And Jesus prays that by knowing the Father, we would be one, just as he and the Father are one. Jesus prays for the unity of his Church. When we look at the Church today, it seems very divided. And it sort of is, but also sort of not. The Church will always be one, regardless of how divided it seems to be. Because to be a member of Christ's Church simply means that we are baptized into him, and we remain in him. Every baptized Christian, even if they don't think much of Baptism, is baptized into Christ. And if we are baptized into Christ, then we are one with one another. Union with Jesus is the basis for our unity with one another. That's our invisible unity.

But on the outside, we don't always demonstrate this unity very well. We have visible divisions among Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant Christians. We have divisions between evangelicals, exvangelicals, liberals, conservatives, Lutherans, Baptists, Pentecostals, etc. Even within congregations, there are often divisions. And these divisions are not good. They reveal that we are not united in the Truth. We should be. Jesus prays that we would be. But we are not.

The current popular approach is to just agree to disagree. This isn't the worst approach. It's better than hating or killing one other. Obviously, we need to be able to coexist on the same planet and under the same Lord. But agreeing to disagree usually means that we're going to go our separate ways, we're not going to talk to each other, or, at the very least, we're not going to talk about the things we disagree about. We might appear unified, or pretend to be unified, but it's really just ignoring the divisions that exist. It's a bad approach, because it permits more division and leads to shallow doctrine.

It's also not very loving. If we believe that our understanding of Scripture is correct, then it is not loving of us to let our brothers remain in error. If we are convinced that our doctrine is true, we should want all Christians to believe it. And if we're not convinced that it is true, we should give it up and believe whatever is true. And we should allow our brothers who disagree with us to try to persuade us if they are convinced that their doctrine is true.

It feels to us that unity is impossible. It's very difficult to persuade someone to change their mind about anything. And for some diabolical reason, our culture is convinced that it's impolite to talk about religion. If we think about it from a natural perspective, the unity of the Church sounds like an impossible dream. But here's what we have going for us: the Holy Spirit and the will of God. Every Christian has been given the Holy Spirit, it is the will of God that we would be one, and it is the will of God that we would be sanctified in the Truth. This is God's will, and

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the Holy Spirit is capable of drawing us closer together. But we can't expect much to happen if we never talk about our divisions.

As long as sin is part of the equation, our visible unity will never be perfect. And I don't think we will ever unite in one association. That would be too much power for a select few persons. But I am hopeful that, in both doctrine and practice, we will come closer together. It's not because we are capable of doing it, but because it is the will of God, and the Holy Spirit is capable. So we should join Jesus in praying that our Father would sanctify us in the Truth.

One day, this will all be fulfilled. The unity that we already have as Christians, and the deeper unity that we strive for, is a foretaste of the resurrection. We look forward to that day when Christ returns. He will set our hearts and our minds right. We will have a deeper knowledge of God, and perfect union with God and one another.

Jesus went to the Father to make this desire a reality. In his love, he went to the Father by way of the cross and resurrection. He went through death and resurrection in order to atone for our sins and bring us through death and resurrection with him. If we have died with him, we will also be raised with him and ascend with him. Jesus is our crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord. We are one in him, and we will be one in him. Amen.

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