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Easter 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Church as the Soul of the World”

Text: John 17:11b-19

Alleluia! Christ is ascended! [**He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!**] Alleluia!

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we get to listen to Jesus pray. He isn't teaching, He isn't sparring with the Pharisees, He isn't telling a parable - He's praying. And when you pray, sometimes you pray a prepared prayer, like the Lord's Prayer. But sometimes you just pray what's on your heart. And that's especially true when you're in a stressful or scary situation. When a loved one is sick or in the hospital. When you have a big decision to make and you don't know what to do. When you're facing a frightening situation. At such times, what we pray reveals what's in our hearts.

And then sometimes, we get to listen to someone else praying. And those times can be precious. Like when we get to hear a small child praying the Lord's Prayer here at church with us, and we hear the faith being passed down to the next generation. When parents hear their child at night praying *God bless mommy and daddy*. Or when you're in one of those difficult times and you're drained and all prayed out, and someone prays for you and is strong for you just when you need them to be.

So to get to hear *Jesus* pray . . . we shouldn't underestimate that.

Now most of you know that Jesus prayed a lot. We hear that often in the Gospels, that Jesus goes off by Himself to pray. And most of you know of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He asked Peter, James, and John to pray with Him but they kept falling asleep. And when He was in agony over what was ahead, the sweat pouring from Him like great drops of blood. But this prayer of Jesus that we heard today came *before* that. It's *after* this prayer of Jesus that John says they all went out and entered the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, Jesus is still with His disciples. He wants them to hear this. And that means He prays for them - He prays for us - first; *before* He prays for Himself. *They* are in His heart, as they always were. This is going to be a difficult time for them, so He prays for them.

And the **first** thing Jesus prays for here is that His Father would ***keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one***. I fear that most of

the time, when we hear those words, it is in a Rodney King, bumper sticker, kind of way. That Jesus wants us to all just get along, that we all coexist, that we accept and tolerate our differences and different beliefs. This is what the modern day ecumenical movement has been all about - that all the different beliefs of different denominations and even different religions don't really matter. We just all need to join together and get along. And while *sociologically* that might have its benefits, that we get along with our neighbors and co-workers, if that spills over into our *theology*, it is catastrophic. And it is not what Jesus means at all.

For Jesus prays for His Father to ***keep us in His name***, and *by* this, *by* keeping us in *His name*, ***that we may be one***. So the oneness comes *by His name*, not in any other way, and certainly not in the name of any other gods - be they names of deities, or causes or movements that have become the gods of people's lives. They can't give us the oneness we need, or that Jesus is praying for here. For the oneness Jesus is praying for here is much deeper than that. **For the oneness that is at the heart of the Scriptures is the oneness of marriage**. When a biological man and a biological female are united and the two become ***one*** flesh. That's the oneness the Son has with the Father, and the oneness He prays for us here - first and foremost with Him, and then, therefore, with one another. Because it is in *His* name. It isn't to just get along or coexist, but to be united with Jesus and therefore to God **in Baptism**, where He puts His name on us, and we are therefore one with one another because we are one with Him. This is Jesus as the Bridegroom and His Church as the Bride image that is all over the Scriptures. A oneness in truth, and a oneness that cannot be broken.

Maybe the reason we don't understand this anymore is because our understanding of marriage has been so damaged in our world today, where any two persons can get "married," and that now usually means little more than co-habitation or procuring certain legal rights. If that's all marriage is, then it ain't much. But if it is a oneness like Christ and His Bride, the Church, where Jesus lays down His life for her and she joyfully submits to Him as the one who loves and serves only her *as His own life . . .* well, we could use a lot more marriages like that in our world today. **That's the oneness Jesus wants with you!** And not just you, but all people. Which is pretty amazing, when you consider how sinful and (frankly) unloveable we can be.

Which brings us to a **second** thing Jesus prays for us here, and that the Father ***sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth***. To sanctify means *to make holy*. And notice here that Jesus doesn't pray that the disciples *make themselves* holy - as if that's something we can do! - but that *the Father* sanctify them. And that happens by the Word of God. The Word of God that makes us holy by the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness that Jesus is about to die on the cross for.

Now, when you talk about being holy, or sanctifying, or the biggest word of all, *sanctification*, many people think it is what we do. That it is the result of us leading a

holy life. And while that is the *result*, that is not the cause. We are not the cause. The cause is God's Word, His Absolution. And this misunderstanding - by the world and by Christians - is why, I think, many unbelievers think Christians are hypocrites. We talk about holy but we don't lead holy lives. And they're right. We don't. We're sinners, just like them. We need holy-ing, just like them. So if our holiness came from what we do, we're sunk.

But holiness doesn't come from us. It never did. What is unholy cannot make itself holy. Go back to the Old Testament and think about the Tabernacle and the Temple. What was their purpose? It was to make the people holy. God dwelt with His people so that He could share His holiness with them and make them holy. And that didn't change once Jesus came. All that changed is that the Temple of God was now no longer made of stones, but of flesh and bones! But that flesh and bones was about to die on the cross, rise from the dead, and as we celebrated this week, ascend into heaven. But He would still be present with us, now in His Word. His Word preached and proclaimed, and His Word attached to water and bread and wine. His Word through which the Holy Spirit would now work **to make us sinful and (frankly) unloveable brides holy in the forgiveness of our sins**. Jesus had done that, He says, while He was with them. But ***now He is going to the Father***.

So He prays for us. For our oneness, and our sanctification.

For while Jesus is going to the Father, they are not. Not yet. They must remain. So Jesus doesn't pray for them to be taken out of the world, but - and here's the **third** thing Jesus prays here for us - that His Father ***keep them from the evil one***. Because when you're one with God and forgiven and sanctified by His Word, you are going to have one very powerful and evil enemy, who is going to harass you and seduce you and do whatever He can to turn you against God or lure you away from Him. And this evil one, the devil, has a very influential and (perhaps you may think) unlikely ally - ***you!*** That is, your sinful flesh. The sin you were born with, that old Adam in you that keeps fighting against the new man of faith. Remember what St. Paul said about that? His frustration! That he knew what he *should* do and what he *wanted* to do, but his sinful flesh kept dragging him into sin anyway! Maybe you have felt that, too. Well, not maybe. *You have*. So Jesus prays for us, for protection. You're sinful flesh is hard enough to fight, and then there is the pressure from the world around us, and the attacks of the devil! Who could stand? **No one but Jesus**. So He did. For us. He won the fight we couldn't. So (1.) make them one with us, Father. And (2.) sanctify, forgive them, Father. And (3.) protect them, Father. Jesus praying to His Father for us.

But not just for us. Because Jesus goes on to say, ***As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world***. Because the world needs them. That's why Jesus doesn't pray for the Father to take them out of the world. The world needs them. And you.

Because Christians are the soul of the world. Listen to this snippet from an early Christian letter that talks about this:

In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians throughout the cities of the world. The soul dwells *in* the body but is not *of* the body. Likewise Christians dwell in the world but are not of the world. . . . The flesh hates the soul and wages war against it, even though it has suffered no wrong, because it is hindered from indulging in its pleasures. Similarly the world also hates the Christians, even though it has suffered no wrong, because they set themselves against its pleasures. [But] The soul loves the flesh that hates it and its members, and Christians love those who hate them. The soul is enclosed in the body, but it holds the body together. And though Christians are detained in the world as if in a prison, they in fact hold the world together. . . . Such is the important position to which God has appointed them, and it is not right for them to decline it. (Letter to Diognetus, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Vol. IVb, John 11-21, p. 244)

I don't know if you ever thought of yourself in that way before, but that makes you and where you live and what you do pretty important. It is the Church being the salt, or the preservative, of the world, as Jesus also said (Matthew 5:13). Preserving the world from sin, death, and evil. And so it should be of no surprise to us that as the influence of the Church in the world wanes, the evil in the world rises.

And so for such an important task, Jesus has given His Church not only (1.) the oneness of Baptism into Him and (2.) the sanctification, or forgiveness, of His Word, but also (3.) the food of His Body and Blood to feed and strengthen us for this life. How else could we survive? But with a Bridegroom who lays down his life for us and loves and serves us, and who sends us His Spirit to sanctify us with His Word of forgiveness and life, and who feeds us with Himself that he live in us and we in Him, **all that we need we have**. And what the world needs, we are and have. And now we are sent out into the world, to our places, to our vocations, with the blessing of the Lord. His blessing to sustain us and the world.

That's what Jesus is praying for us. And how good for us to hear that! That as we come to the end of this Easter season and celebrate the sending of the Holy Spirit next week with the Feast of Pentecost, we not only live in confidence and faith for all that Jesus has done for us, but also in His purpose for our lives. That we are not just treading water until we die, but **have a much more important purpose than that: to be the blessing of Jesus to the world**. To be the soul of the world. To pray for the world as Jesus has prayed for us, and to proclaim His Word of truth, that all people may be one with us in Jesus, be sanctified with us in Jesus, and live with us in Jesus forever. That's why Jesus came, and why **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] And why **Christ is ascended!** [*He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!*] Alleluia! And amen! That's what we say at the end of prayers. Amen! To end this Easter season. And Amen! Let it be so with us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.