

**Sermon      May 12, 2024      John 17:11-19**

**Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

One of the great miracles of Christian Church is its continual survival. The church has come through multiple heresies, plagues, famines, large-scale wars, and scandals, yet it keeps on ticking.

The Christian faith we confess – “the faith that has once for all been entrusted to the saints,” as St. Jude says . . . the faith that has come down to us in the Creeds and Confessions of those believers who came before us – has not changed across the millennia. And this is so even though the Church has seen the rise and fall of nations and empires. It has survived governments who supported her . . .and governments that were downright hostile to her and sought her destruction.

Today many people are concerned about the fact that we seem to be entering what some call a ‘post-Christian era’ in the Western world. And perhaps we are. Interest in historic Christianity seems to be waning. Church attendance is down across the board, regardless of the denomination or non-denomination. People tend to follow their own preferences when it comes to religious matters from whatever is available to them on the ‘spiritual buffet table’. I often meet people who say they are spiritual but yet don’t go to church.

And yet, still the church goes on . . . sometimes struggling, sometimes faltering, sometimes small in number. But it just keeps going and going and going – like the Energizer bunny who just won’t quit. The Church has survived communism. It survived Russia and the Soviet Union. is surviving in China and places like Sudan, where in spite of official opposition, whether it be from Communism or Islam, the number of Christians continues to grow. It was Joseph Stalin who once said that the Christian Church was like a hard, iron spike – the harder you drive it, the deeper it goes.

So, what’s the reason? What’s the secret behind the Church’s longevity? What keeps her going over and against every attempt to snuff her out, shove her into the margins of society, or drive her underground?

The answer lies in today’s Gospel reading. Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer – the prayer He prayed in the upper room on the night when He was betrayed. A prayer that is uniquely His; *for no one else could ever pray this prayer*. It is this prayer that is the secret to the Church’s life and survival, and why she keeps rolling on to this day and will do so until the end of days.

Jesus' High Priestly Prayer is laid out in three parts: Verses 1 to the first part of verse 11; The second part of 11 to verse 19; and finally verses 20-26. First, Jesus prays to the Father for Himself – for His mission in the world, for His impending death and resurrection – that He would bring glory to the Father in His sacrificial death on the cross so that all might know the Father and the Son and so have eternal life.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> part, Jesus prays for His apostles. Apostles were the first 12 to go out and get the Church going. Apostles are people who are right out in front starting a new movement. They were gathered in the upper room with Jesus, heard this prayer, and then wrote it down afterwards. These Apostles were given to Him by the Father. Jesus taught them everything by the Word given Him by the Father. And they believed. These men would be His Apostles, His "sent ones." They would be His authorized representatives. They would go out into the world to speak in His stead and by His command. They would speak this way because Jesus was going to the Father, but they would now be the ones going out into the world to bring glory to Him.

And finally, in the third and last part, verses 20 to 26, Jesus prays for the *whole Church*, for all believers everywhere, for "those who will believe in me through their word," the apostolic word. And that's us, as well. He prays for their unity in union with Him, that the world would know that the Father sent His Son into the world and loves the world in His beloved Son. This is the prayer that has kept the Church going through all these years, decades, centuries, and 2 millennia. This is the secret of the Church's survival – this High Priestly Prayer of her Lord. This prayer given by Jesus with his disciples in the upper room the night he was arrested by the Jews.

Today we're going to zoom in closer on that second part of this all-important prayer. The focus is the apostles and their work. It's important work, for sure.

In the First Reading from the book of Acts, we hear how Matthias was chosen and added to the Apostles to fill the vacancy left by Judas. The Apostolic ministry is greater than the man. Judas was gone, that is true. He had betrayed His Lord and hung himself in despair. His Apostolic office, however, remained and needed to be filled. Matthias was the man chosen for the task. And later, Paul, too . . . the thirteenth apostle, as he describes himself as one "untimely born," on the road to Damascus. And then, generation after generation, men were placed into the office of ministry to carry on the work these men started.

The apostolic ministry that Jesus established is a sent ministry. The Apostles are sent into a sinful, dying world that has been redeemed by Jesus. Jesus' prayer is not that the apostles would be soon taken with him to heaven. His prayer is that while they fulfill their Apostolic work in the world, they would be protected against the evil one, that is, Satan.

To our modern ears it might sound a bit silly and superstitious for Jesus to talk about the devil. However, the *greatest threat* to the church is not governments or human opposition or whatever else the “woke” world raises up against Christ’s church; but rather, the old evil foe. The prince of this world knows that he is already defeated, and yet delights in spreading the lie that Christ has not conquered death for you. He either convinces people that God does not exist or lulls them into complacency about the coming judgement that will take place on the last day.

And so, Jesus prays that His apostles would be sanctified in the truth. His ministry is a sanctified ministry, a holy ministry. It sure isn’t holy because the apostles or their successors in office are holy in themselves. They, too, are sinners . . . sinners justified by faith for Jesus’ sake. But the Apostolic ministry is holy because the Word is holy. And all who hold an office in this ministry are sanctified by the truth and holiness of the Word.

These first Apostles Jesus sent into the world did not carry heavy binders under both arms containing the latest program to revive the church. They were fishermen, a tax collector, brothers, a political operative, and the like. People you would find on the street every day. What they had was Jesus’ Word and the promised Holy Spirit. And with that Word and Spirit they started the ball of the Church rolling which has continued to this very day right up to this very morning.

And what has kept the ball rolling has not been human ingenuity and initiative, but the power of this High Priestly Prayer and the High Priest who stands behind it. Jesus said He consecrated Himself so that His Apostles would be sanctified in the truth. And being sanctified - made holy - by Jesus’ death and resurrection, He now consecrates and ordains them to speak the truth concerning Him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And this ‘Truth-speaking’ is what the Church is supposed to be about, as the Apostle Paul encourages us to *speaking the truth love*.

The Church doesn’t exist to make people happy and is not something for them to go to and enjoy. The truth can hurt at times. It burns. The mission of the Church isn’t about fixing all of life’s problems, they are going to happen nonetheless and provide the opportunity for us to flex our faith. The Church is never trying to transform society into a better one. It’s not about improving someone’s social or economic status, or of the other countless ways we have gotten it so wrong. Rather, the Church is about speaking the truth about our dire condition and our desperate need for Jesus’ forgiveness and salvation from judgement, death, and hell. Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and reign is the one and only solution for our unsavory predicament.

There's one thing to take to heart in all this talk about the nature of the Church. That thing is that nothing in this life is perfect. It will be, but that day is not today. That day will be on the Last Day when every tear is wiped away from our eyes and we behold the new creation Jesus will bring forth for us to enjoy without end. So, for us to live our lives expecting perfection or the pursuit of perfection is a fool's errand. That also means that this church isn't going to be perfect. I'm not perfect. Don't expect me to be. You're not perfect. Silly for me to expect that you will be. So often the grass seems greener in other pastures, and that things should be so much better than they are. But here we are kind of stuck with each other after all these years. We are given the opportunity to be our imperfect selves together. That's not such a terrible thing when we have that Word of Truth and the Spirit that propels us toward the finish line. THAT is what makes this place still good.

There's that one part in the Nicene Creed that we say, "I believe in the one holy Christian and apostolic Church." When we confess that part of the creed, we are saying what St. Paul declares in Ephesians, namely, that the Church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone." In other words, Christ is the Lord and Head of the Church, as imperfect as it is on this side of eternity. He prays for His Church. He prays for His apostles and pastors that they would speak the truth of His Word. He prays that you would remain in Him through the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation that He delivers to you through those same men. And *because of that prayer*, the Church rolls on today, tomorrow, and to the end of days. This is most certainly true. Thanks be to God!

God bless you with His Word and Spirit that, just as Jesus prayed, we would be united in Christ, to His glory, and abiding in His love. Amen.

**The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in him. Amen.**

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