

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

This Sunday we finish our journey with Jesus through his earthly life. We also complete our celebration of his resurrection on this the seventh of a week of Sundays. Here at the last, we find Jesus with his disciples in the upper room in the midst of his high priestly prayer. The next day Jesus will be crucified, so Jesus has a last few critically important things to teach and pray. These words were for his disciples that night who were about to lose Jesus. These words are for us, too, who like the first disciples, still puzzle and wonder about the meaning and mystery of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. When someone is speaking in this kind of situation, we really want to perk up our ears, because no matter who it is that is speaking their final words, they are doing their best to make them count. These are perhaps the most important things ever said in their whole lives.

In today's reading Jesus highlights three works of God that he does on behalf of his disciples: Keeping them all in one heart and mind in God; Guarding them from the Evil One; and keeping them as God's cleansed and holy people.

Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. John 17:11

Unity is one of the hallmarks of the Christian church. Even though we may be divided across different parts of the world and find ourselves in different denominations, all believers live in the same Spirit which gives us unity. Jesus prays for that. Yet he also prays that Christians agree with each other on what the bible teaches. This is why we have inherited such things as the ecumenical creeds – the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian. They were the project of many different learned people who came together and made these statements of faith so it would be clear what Christians believe. If someone didn't hold that God is triune, like the unitarians, they were out of bounds. If someone held that Jesus was not fully divine, like the Arians, they were not holding to the true faith. If anyone had the position that baptism was not a means of grace, as the Anabaptists, then they differed from what the church holds to be true. If we do not agree on what the bible teaches, we do not have unity. Jesus prays for unity.

We see the impact of this effect everyday of our lives. Multi-party politics has made it more and more difficult for us to be one nation under God. Differences in skin color has

been a dividing issue for a very long time here in our country and these days people might rightly say it is getting worse. Together we are one race, the human race, but tensions push and pull and one group finds fault with another, one holds the other out of favor, and so on it goes not just with skin color, but also with just about every other position or view you can take in life. Unity sounds nice, but in reality it is very elusive.

Most of us in this congregation are originally from the Pittsburgh area. But not all. Some are from Missouri, others are from New York, Wisconsin, the Philippines, Eritrea, India, and maybe a few other places. I lived in Wisconsin for the better part of my life before moving to Pittsburgh. In Wisconsin we have a football team you may have heard of – The Green Bay Packers. We also have a baseball team – the Milwaukee Brewers. When we came to Pittsburgh, were we supposed to automatically switch from rooting for the Packers and Brewers to rooting for the Steelers and Pirates? Some would say, “Of course! When in Rome...” But in reality it is hard to change one’s ways, especially those we grew up with. People in this area are quite nice, very much like Midwesterners. So when we come together wearing different jerseys, generally it’s ok. The same cannot be said for when you go to the stadium. If you wear your Steelers Jersey to a Ravens game in Baltimore, expect to be jeered. If a Browns fan goes to a game at Heinz field, they may not be well received, varying mostly on the amount of anti-freeze ingested by the surrounding Steeler fans. They’re all football fans, but they are not united in their views and don’t always treat each other kindly. This is one thing the Lord is praying for – that we all support, root for, and play on team Jesus, treat each other as the brothers and sisters in Christ that we are.

The second thing to highlight in the scripture for today is God’s guarding work on our behalf. Jesus prays,

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. John 17:15

Jesus himself did battle with Satan every day of his earthly life. King Herod tried to kill him when he was a very young boy, and the onslaught never ceased until Good Friday. Jesus dealt with Satan during his forty days of temptation in the wilderness, he was there with Jesus in Gethsemane, and all points in between. Now Satan has turned his sights on us. Review the book of Job to see how Satan works. He seeks to remove all the good things from our lives. Then he condemns us as worthless sinners. Next he will try to drive us to despair and give up faith and hope in God. And accomplishing all that, then he wants us to die. Sounds fun, right? But it is real and we have seen the same in people we know and we have experienced some of this in our own lives. Jesus guarded

his disciples from such ends and now he prays the Father keep them and us from Satan, the Evil One.

We live in a world that includes much evil. We try to guard against it as we can. We have locks on our doors and windows and security systems in our homes and vehicles. We have passwords to keep out ner-do-wells from our computer accounts. Many people use a virtual private network – a VPN- to keep their online presence hidden and private. There is insurance you can get in case someone steals your identity and racks up thousands of dollars of debt and causes all sorts of other trouble for you. Many have taken the Covid vaccine to keep from getting sick. We guard against evil as much as we might.

In this passage Jesus calls upon the ultimate weapon against evil – the power of God! As God's children, he surrounds us with a field of protection. Nothing gets in without his say so. We need have no fear as we are protected in this way. Troubles may come, but only the ones God sees fit to help harden us in the fight and strengthen our resolve to live in and by faith alone.

The third and last element of Jesus' prayer I want to take a look at is God's sanctifying work in us. Jesus prays,

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. John 17:17

Sanctify is one of those fancy, highfalutin words we use sometimes in the church. It simply means to be set apart and make holy. This main room in church is the sanctuary, a place set apart and made special for worship. God sets us apart from the corrupted world for his special purpose as the holy people of God. How does he do this? He takes us unholy and unclean people and makes us clean. He does this with his word. We experience this in multiple ways most every Sunday when we are in worship. At the beginning of the service, sometimes we have this passage from John,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

When our sins are forgiven by God and we are cleansed from anything else that might be held against us, we are sanctified, made clean, and holy.

Over the last year or more it's all about being clean. When the Covid virus began to spread, the first thing we were told was to wash our hands for at least 20 seconds. We've got to get those hands clean because they may have touched who knows what

and by washing them we won't get the pathogens into our body. These days there is hand sanitizer at the entrance to every store, office, and institution! Things can also be sterilized with bleach, some alcohols, and fire. I remember when I took hunter safety when I was a kid and we went through some first aid lessons. If we needed to patch a wound, it was important to use something sterile. The filmstrip showed how to take a handkerchief or piece of T-shirt and "toast" it over the fire. The fire helped to sanitize the cloth. Fire also disinfects pocket knives and other tools you might need for first aid use.

God cleanses us by his word. His word is administered to us in different ways. He cleanses us with the words of absolution in the confession. We wash our hands to get them clean. God washed us clean in the water of baptism. Fire can kill germs and make cloth and tools sanitary. God's word is a fire and it purifies those who receive it in their hearts. Remember the teaching from St. Paul,

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. 1 Timothy 4:4-5

We can use this basic recipe to sanctify our meals, our homes, our vehicles, our motorcycles, pets, and anything else we have. Combine a passage from the bible with a word of prayer and viola, the thing is made holy. Then there is also that other teaching from Jesus that gets right to the point,

You are already clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. John 15:3

Not much to add here. The word of God we read and hear made the disciples holy and it makes us holy, too. When this happens, Jesus' prayer that we would be sanctified, made holy in God's word is realized.

When we are gathered together in church, we come with all sorts of spiritual conditions that would make us unclean. We fester with animosity, hurt, fear, self-doubt, guilt, unnecessary heartbreak, and the like. We share God's word throughout the service and add prayer to it. No matter what condition we came in, we leave as God's sanctified people. We leave cleansed not so much because we have renewed our commitment to live the Christian life or something like that, as wonderful as that would be. We leave because we have been in the presence of God, his sanctifying word and prayer, and God has made us clean. And we walk out those doors as God's holy people once again. Let there be no doubt about this in any of our hearts today. Amen

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