

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 13, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."

- John 17:17

That's Jesus' prayer for you; that the Father would make you holy. Holiness isn't something Lutherans talk all that much about. We're more interested in justification by grace through faith. Talk of living holy lives, of holiness, of sanctification, makes Lutheran theologians and pastors nervous. We tiptoe around it because it seems like the backdoor through which works-righteousness regains it's footing.

And that's true, if sanctification is something that is left for us to accomplish. After all the old Adam, is always looking for things to do in order to prove to God why God should save him. Sanctification becomes taking with the left hand what the right hand gave with justification. You are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and now you need to *[insert pet moral/political program here]* - if you're a fundamentalist, don't dance, drink, smoke or chew, or go with girls who do and make sure to vote Republican; if you're a mainline Protestant you can dance, drink, smoke, and chew just make sure you buy fair-trade everything, drive an electric car, recycle, and vote Democratic; because in either case if you do otherwise you might not really be a Christian. This is the "Jesus and," or worse "Jesus, but," approach to sanctification. Jesus saves, and now you need to do this *to prove you're a Christian*. Jesus saves, but now you need to do that *to remain saved*.

"Jesus and" and "Jesus but" are attractive. The Gospel that Jesus saves sinners through NO work of their own is dangerous. After all, people might hear that and

think they can sin. So the Gospel must be protected from itself, and the only way to do that is to go back to the Law. And that's what we do because the idea that we should do something to earn or at least deserve salvation is hardwired into our broken hearts, minds, and souls. It just makes sense.

The Gospel goes against our lived experience, because Law is how the world works. Yet in our Gospel lesson Jesus does not tell the disciples to make themselves holy. He asks the Father to make them holy; to make them holy in the truth, and God's Word is truth.

For the last two weeks we've found ourselves in the midst of what's known as the Farewell Discourse at the Last Supper as the Lord prepares the disciples for His betrayal, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Today we find ourselves in what follows the Farewell Discourse. After Jesus promises them the Holy Spirit, and tells them to abide in Him, He ends with prayer. It's called the High Priestly prayer because in it Jesus takes the roll of the high priest as the intercessor, the mediator who prays on behalf of God's people.

The lectionary has dropped us right in the middle of the prayer. Jesus is praying for the disciples, and by extension, you and me. He's praying for us because, *"they were yours, and you gave them to me."* That in itself is worth the price of admission. Your Heavenly Father has given you to Jesus. You belong to Jesus.

Then He says, *"and they have kept your word,"* which has a tendency to hit us right in the gut, because what we hear is not what Jesus says, but what we think He must secretly mean. He says, they have kept your word, and what you and I hear is, *"they have kept your commandments."* We hear that and we're suddenly confronted with the Law and all the ways we sure haven't kept the commandments. And this is where we have to allow the Holy Spirit to retrain our ears to hear what Jesus actually says. He says, not commandments, but "Your word," God's word? How do you keep God's word?

To find that out we have to read on. We, who haven't kept the commandments, can't be afraid to read on, because this is Jesus prayer for us. When we read on what we find is that Jesus has given us the Father's word, *"For the words, that you gave to me, I have given to them, and they have received them."*

Wait, what words are those? *"They have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me."* When Jesus says, "they have kept your word," this is the word He's talking about: The promise that Jesus has come from the Father, that the Father has sent Jesus.

If we think back to what John has told us previously in his Gospel this becomes more wondrously clear. Why did the Father send the Son? *"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him."*

That word there, "to keep," "they kept your word?," τηρέω? It means to guard protectively. In other words to hold it like you would a precious treasure. For this indeed is a valuable treasure: The word that God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to save sinners, to save you.

Jesus is praying on behalf of you and all who hold tight to that word and promise of God. He's commending you into the Father's care. He says, *"I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those you gave me... I am no longer in the world but they are in the world."* That word we translate world. It's a poor translation. The Greek word is "κόσμος," and it means far more than what we've narrowed it down to. He's not talking about the "secular" world. He's talking about the cosmos; the whole created order, everything seen and unseen, the powers and principalities, the angels and demons, sin, death, and the devil - not just unbelievers - but everything that is arrayed against God and that desires to lead us from God.

It's a hostile cosmos out there and so Jesus commends us into the hands of the Father, saying *"protect them in your name."* You are protected from all the forces

of the cosmos because you bear the name of God! That's what Jesus is asking - and we know that the Father hears His prayer.

Why does Jesus want us to be protected? *"So that they maybe one as we are one."* If you've seen the state of the Church you can begin to see why this prayer is so necessary. Because we're easy pickings for the forces that would divide the Church, let alone that would divide churches. The bad news is plain to see, but the good news here is that what unites the Church, what makes her one, is not the visual trappings of the external institution, it is the word of the Gospel and the sacraments through which we abide in Christ and He in us.

Still, the lack of visible unity, is a good reminder of what Jesus says next, *"I have given them Your word, and the cosmos has hated them because they do not belong to the cosmos, just as I do not belong to the cosmos."* We don't belong to the cosmos because we have received the Word. That's what the cosmos - the forces that defy God - hate. They don't hate you, per se, but the Word you have been given. Why? Because that Word, that promise, that Jesus has come for you, and died for you, and risen for you, turns you to Jesus, it gives you faith in Jesus. And turning towards Jesus, having Jesus as the object which your faith reaches out and grabs ahold of, means your not reaching for things of the cosmos. You won't serve power, fame, fortune, sex, health, youth, race, nation or any of the gods who lay claim to our hearts, and want to be the object towards which our faith reaches.

Knowing that, then notice this, *"I am not asking you to take them out of the cosmos, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one."* Jesus knows the dangers of your being here. He's aware of the pain, suffering, and death you and I know and experience. He's aware that life is hard, especially for those who prize Christ and His Law and His Gospel above all else. He knows that the devil is ever present just waiting for an opportunity to lead us into sin, and eventually into despair. So asks He asks the Father to protect you - to continue to strengthen You in the Word, to hold you fast to Jesus, to place before you Jesus, *crucified and*

risen for you, so that you can remember that Jesus came for you, He was sent for you, and He knows your suffering, your loss, even your death because He has made them His own.

Yet He doesn't just want the Father to protect you. He wants you to be made holy. "*Sanctify them*," He prays. He wants you to become holy as He is holy. Just as Jesus become a child of man in the fullest sense, so He wants you to become a child of God in the fullest sense. And this cosmos, as bent and broken as it is, is the place in which the Father has chosen to make you His child.

Why do that in the midst of the mess that sin and death have wrought? Why do that in the midst of what the devil sees as his kingdom? First, because God can't tear us out of the cosmos, without tearing us apart. Sin and death are not external to us, they are very much a part of us. There would be nothing left of us if the Father did it that way.

This is how He makes us holy. Holiness is not found in how well or how often you pray, or how many good works you do, or how often you fast. Holiness has only one source, the Word of God. Jesus asks the Father to sanctify you in truth, and His word is truth. And as you know from elsewhere in John, who is the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us? Jesus. Grace and truth come through whom? Jesus. Who is "*the way, and the truth, and the life*?" Jesus.

It's Jesus who makes us holy through the Word, because He is the Word. The Word who speaks truth because He is the Truth. He makes you holy by uniting you to Himself in your baptism. He makes you Holy as His Word comes to you to renew Your faith reminding you day by day that His life is for you, His death is for you, His resurrection is for you; and faith in turn reaches out and grabs ahold of Him and His promises, and receives the gifts He gives: forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation. He makes you holy as He feeds you on His own flesh and blood just as He spoke and promised, "*This is my body given for you*," "*This is my blood shed for you*." He makes you holy as He enters you and takes from you everything that separates you from Him and gives you Himself in exchange.

Day by day He puts to death your old Adam, your old Eve. Day by day He heals you by the Word - His Law, pruning back what sin causes to grow; His Gospel, reminding you what matters most - You belong to Him and in Him You are forgiven.

He is the source of your holiness, and it's not the kind of holiness we so often think of. It's not a holiness that is bent on making ourselves more acceptable to Him. He already came for you. He already died for you. He already rose for you. There's nothing for which to make yourself acceptable. No, this is a holiness bent on making you what He is, and that is the work of your whole life. It's the work of ordinary life, lived by ordinary saints, and that is what you are.

That's what you are, not because you look like it, but because He has promised it, and will make it come true. That is what you are, not because you look like it, but because He meets you at His font, in His Word, at His altar. That is what you are, not because you look like it, but because that is what the world needs. It needs ordinary saints in ordinary life, because that is how the powers and principalities of the cosmos are overcome. Through ordinary saints redeeming ordinary life, one ordinary day at a time as you bring Jesus to your families and neighbors; as you care for the sick, the dying, the poor; as you set the prisoner free - whether they are physically imprisoned or spiritually.

"As You have sent Me into the world," Jesus says, *"so I have sent them."* Sent to bring the Word who sanctifies into all the things of life. Sent to bring the Word who sanctifies to those who need sanctification. Sent to bring the Word who sanctifies the whole cosmos just as He sanctified you, through His crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Amen.