

"Jesus' Prayer For You"

John 17:20-26

May 12, 2013

7th Sunday of Easter

I saw a cartoon of a pastor greeting people after church was over. He has a horrified look on his face and the cloud above his head shows him thinking, "Oh, there's Bob. I said I'd pray for him. 'Dear God, please bless Bob!'. The balloon shows him then saying, "Hey, Bob, I've been praying for you!"

The cartoon illustrates how lightly we regard prayer and how faithless we are in employing it. We may promise to pray for someone. We may be on the prayer chain through which we receive prayer needs. But do we actually pray for those for whom we promise to pray? Do we pray for those people on the prayer chain or do we just use that to find out the latest news and information about church members and others who are experiencing various troubles?

Even when we do pray, it may be in a very casual or flippant manner. Like the cartoon, we pray only when we see the person coming for whom we've promised to pray so that we can truthfully say we've been praying for them. Or, our prayers may be very generic ("God bless so and so," or very superficial, ("Lord, give to so and so this, that, or the other thing.")

Jesus Christ, on the other hand, takes prayer very seriously. As we come to the end of another Easter season, we recount all the things Jesus has done for us. He lived the perfect life for you which God required of you. He overcame the Tempter and his temptations for you. He died the death you deserved by your sins on Good Friday. He defeated death for you which you could not do by rising from the grave alive on Easter. That's a pretty heavy load of responsibilities which He did purely out of His great love for you so that you might be forgiven for all of your sins, declared holy by God the Father, in relationship with Him, spared the horror of hell, and given the joy of everlasting life in heaven.

Yet, on top of all of this, having ascended into heaven and sat on the right hand of God, Jesus now prays for you. These are not some “hit and miss” prayers when He happens to think of them. They are not generic “God bless you” prayers. He is praying specifically for you, as well as praying for what you specifically need. Our Gospel reading for today shows that.

In our text, which takes place at the Last Supper on the night before He died, as Jesus prays, He says that He is not praying just for His apostles who were present. Jesus is praying for those who would believe in Him through the word of the apostles. That would include those who heard the Gospel in the apostles’ preaching, as well as those who would hear the Gospel through the writings of the apostles – that which would become the Holy Scriptures. That would include you and me.

What does Jesus pray for? It’s not the kind of prayer which we are used to saying – God bless them and give them this, that, or the other thing. What Jesus finds to be most important for His followers and for which He prays is this: “that they may be one.” He prays that all believers – from those apostles sitting by Him all the way down to us and beyond – would share a unity together.

Of course, that’s easier said than done. Nevertheless, religious people will try to effect religious unity in many ways. We can form denominations, pass resolutions, and issue declarations – all in the hope that unity will occur. Yet such bureaucratic unity rarely gets very far. There is still fighting and disagreement which go on. This leads to such strange things as people declaring there to be unity despite disunity (“we will just have to agree to disagree”) or people declaring that unity isn’t all that big of a deal (“we celebrate the richness of our diversity”). Some will even claim that Jesus’ prayer has been answered in these situations, although that seems very strange to me.

Instead of seeing disunity as a bureaucratic problem, we need to see it for what it truly is: a spiritual problem. God created Adam and Eve to have the closest and most perfect union. They didn't create it, cause it, or codify it. They simply received it. The unity Adam and Eve had (and which God intended for all humanity to have) was given to them by God because of who they were: His children.

Sin entered the world and destroyed the unity of God's people, beginning with Adam and Eve. However, Satan was smart enough not to begin by destroying the unity which Adam and Eve had with each other. Rather, Satan, in his tempting, began by destroying the unity Adam and Eve had with God. His temptations did not have Adam and Eve sinning with each other. Satan tempted both of them to doubt God's Word ("did God really say?") and disobey Him. By disuniting Adam and Eve from God through sin, it was (and has been since then) easy to create disunity among people.

Try as we will, we cannot create complete unity among ourselves. The unity of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is the only source of true unity among people. Jesus prays that we may be one "just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you." To be cut off from that unity by sin leaves no hope for our unity. The best we seem to be able to do is create temporary truces and tenuous alliances, all of which break down.

The only way to achieve unity – true and lasting unity – is by dealing with sin. And that's precisely why Jesus came to this world. That for which he prays on the night before He dies, he accomplishes the next day by dying. Jesus takes on the problem which causes disunity – the disunity of people and God, as well as the disunity that exists among people. He successfully sacrifices Himself that sin might be blotted out, that humanity might be united with God, and that people – His people – might be one with one another.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the glory of which we are basking in; His triumphant ascension into heaven which we just celebrated this past Thursday; and His glorious seating at

the right hand of God the Father Almighty show all the pleasure God the Father took in Jesus' work and His acceptance of that work to bring man back to God and people back to each other. The only question remains: how is that unity to be established and implemented?

Earlier in this chapter-long prayer, Jesus says, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one as we are one." When you are baptized, you are baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God gives you unity with Him through this gift. You don't deserve it or create it. It doesn't come about by convention resolution or committee action. Union with God is pure gift which all Christians share.

When Jesus prays for His people, "that they may be one", He is not praying that they may *become* one (that is already a given), but that they may continue to be one. The only thing that disrupts that union among Christian believers is sin and error. Satan continues to say to God's people today, "Did God really say?" and many, like Adam and Eve before them, are not sure of what God says or deny what God says. This is why Christianity remains fragmented and without unity to this day.

What's the solution? The answer is not church bodies resolving in convention resolutions to be unified. The answer is not in Christians working harder to feel more unified. The answer is certainly not to give up and accept or even praise disunity. Jesus goes on to pray, "Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth."

The Word of God creates unity between God and us when combined with water in Holy Baptism, when read or preached in Divine Service, or when spoken and shared in our community. By granting us the forgiveness of sins and creating faith in us, the Word of God creates also creates unity among all who have received those gifts.

Unity is maintained only through that same Word of God as we continue to study, learn, and confess it. Therefore, if you desire unity within this congregation, unity among us and other Lutherans, unity with us and other Christians, don't wait for a convention to pass a

resolution, a program to be created, or a feeling to come over you. Be in the Word of God. Be in Divine Service. Be in Bible Class. Read and study the Word of God outside of the church walls and discuss it with your Christian friends. Stay with the Word of God, even when you are criticized, rejected or tempted to give up the Word of God for some false sense of unity. The task is daunting and you may feel like giving up. But if unity is something given by God in the Word of God and maintained by God through the Word of God and God can do anything, then there is always hope through the power of His Word.

Jesus' prayer for us is a vital one. If Satan can keep Christians fighting among themselves or accepting the disunity that false teaching and error can bring, His job becomes much easier among non-believers. However, a Christian Church united around the word of God is a formidable foe even for Satan himself. Jesus prayed that we may be one, even as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one. May that always be our prayer as well. Amen.