

EASTER VII, 2018

John 17.9-17

In one of the Eucharistic prayers we use in our liturgy of Holy Communion, the prayer ends with this petition to God:

Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and place and unite them with the petitions of our great high priest.

Who is this high priest? It is Jesus. In the *Letter to the Hebrews* we read how Jesus is our high priest, through whom we can approach God in confident faith:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

So Jesus, our great high priest, continually prays to God on our behalf. And what is Jesus praying? That is our Gospel reading today, John 17.

John 17 is known as the "high priestly prayer" of Jesus. It is also called Jesus' "last will and testament." The situation is the night before Jesus died, Maundy Thursday, the Last Supper. Jesus has washed the disciples' feet in preparing for the dinner, taking the role of a servant. He instituted the Eucharist, the Holy Supper. He has given the disciples, whom He now raises to the status of "friends," His final mission instructions. We are to abide in Jesus' love, do His commandments, love one another, and bear fruit in the world.

Now Jesus does one last thing: He prays. He prays for His Church.

Every Christian knows the Lord's Prayer. Or should. Hopefully, every Christian prays it daily, at least once. Even when I visit people with severe memory loss to give them Communion, they usually can pray the Lord's Prayer.

But did you know, there is another Lord's Prayer in the Bible? This is not a prayer our Lord taught us to pray, but one Jesus prays for His Church. He prayed it on the night before He died, as He was about to leave His disciples and go to the cross.

Now: Because Jesus is risen and lives, this is not just Jesus' prayer for the disciples long ago. Jesus prays this pray for His Church in every time and place. It is Jesus' prayer for us, too. His is the prayer we ask God to unite our prayers with in the celebration of Holy Communion.

So, what is Jesus praying for us? What is He asking God the Father to do?

First, Jesus prays for the unity of the Church. He prays that the Church may be one, and that each congregation will be one. It is a unity in hope, doctrine, and charity.

Jesus prays for His Church to be one in its confession of faith, guided by the one hope of the coming Kingdom of God, free from any division, and most of all one in the great, new commandment Jesus gave the Church: to love one another.

To be sure: Jesus' prayer for the unity of the Church awaits for God the Father to answer it. The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church as a whole, and individual congregation, is often divided by conflict, selfishness, human weakness, and our limited imagination. The divisions of the Church undermine its witness to the world and the effectiveness of its proclamation.

This is a fault of our human sin, not the failure of Jesus' prayer. Nevertheless, Jesus still prays for His Church to be one, and for this congregation to be one. In spite of our human failings, Jesus is praying for the Holy Spirit to call, gather, enlighten, sanctify, and keep the Church united in the one true Christian faith.

Second, Jesus prays that God will protect His Church from evil and the hatred of "the world": "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but

I ask you to protect them from the evil one,” prays Jesus.

In John’s Gospel, the “world” does not mean planet earth; it is everything in the universe which is opposed to God’s will and the coming of His kingdom. Jesus prays for God to protect us from these powers.

Growing up, I did not know of the world’s hatred for the Church, at least not in the United States. Being a Christian was normal and going to church on Sunday morning was the most normal thing to do. So it was for everyone in our neighborhood.

Not anymore. Hatred for the Church is worldwide, including our own country. The percentage of Christians in America has fallen to the lowest in history. Those with no religious affiliation has risen from 7% to over one-third of the population in the last twenty years. More people than ever profess to be atheists. In many places and ways, the Church’s witness is not merely ignored; it is despised and rejected vigorously, with hostility, even as our Lord was despised and rejected.

Yet, Jesus does not want His Church to withdraw from the world. Jesus does not want the Church to hide from its opposition. Jesus wants His people to confront the world with the truth of the Gospel. After all, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, the true light which shines in the darkness of this world, which the darkness will not overcome. The world needs to hear the story of Jesus and live in His truth, instead of the non-sense of so much in our time.

So, Jesus continues to pray for God to deliver His Church from every evil and make its witness effective. Jesus is not praying for us to be happy and contented, but to struggle against evil. God’s purpose for us is not our satisfaction, but our salvation, and the salvation of the world.

Third: Jesus prays for His Church to remain “sanctified in the truth.” That is, made holy by being guided by the truth of God. To be sanctified is to be holy, set apart and dedicated to God’s purposes. As Luther’s hymn prays, “Lord, keep us steadfast in Your word.”

It comes down to this: What story defines your life? We hear so much today of “reality TV.” It is supposed to portray real-life situations. But the Gospel invites us to the real reality show for people of every time and place: the life of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we live within the love of the Holy Trinity, we will know true life: that of sacrificial love. We will be sanctified, made holy, set apart for God, in what is ultimately true.

Last, Jesus prays for His Church to know joy. Joy is not about feeling happy. We often confuse joy with happiness. Joy is much deeper than happiness; it is not dependant on our circumstances or our changing feelings. To have joy is to celebrate life in all its goodness. It includes the feelings of gratitude, wonder, and praise. Jesus wants God to give us this joy, in full.

One of the marks of the early Church was the joy of its gatherings. Outsiders found this baffling. The first Christians were not numerous. Most were not wealthy or powerful. They were in constant danger of persecution. Yet they had a peace with God that was expressed in a joy that was uncontainable. Perhaps *radiance* would be a better word to describe the life of the early Christians.

Today we hear “the other Lord’s prayer,” the prayer of our great high priest, Jesus. Jesus prays for His Church to be unified, to be kept holy in God’s truth, to be protected from evil, and to know the joy of life with God. Because Jesus is risen and lives, this is not just Jesus’ prayer for the disciples long ago. Jesus prays this pray for His Church in every time and place.

Isn’t it good to know, whatever struggles you may be having, Jesus is praying for you to remain united with Him, free from evil, to know His joy, to remain steady in His way of truth? Jesus has not abandoned us, just as He said. The risen Christ takes everything to God in prayer. This is our confidence and faith, our hope and courage, for living every day. Amen.