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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Series B)

May 17, 2015

Text: John 17:11b–19

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Many have pondered and considered how the Christian Church has survived for so long. Voltaire, the famous 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher and atheist, declared that within 20 years, Christianity will be dead. And then in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared God to be dead. What he meant was that the human race had grown and matured to a point where the idea of God simply wasn't needed anymore. Needless to say, both were wrong. Christianity is still here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is spreading like wildfire in Africa and Asia even as it faces hostility from Islam and other religious groups. Faith in God's existence remains vital and strong; some have said that the idea of God has never been stronger in our world.

So why has Christianity survived so long? The Roman Empire tried to destroy her. Communism tried to close down her buildings and kill her pastors. Islam tries to subject her to the Koran and Islamic religious law, often times at the edge of the sword. From within, Christianity is distressed by false teachings and heresies. The failures and shortcomings of her leaders and her members is all too evident. But the Church remains. It continues to grow. The presence of this congregation and your attendance in today's service are evidence that the Church endures, even as the Lord Jesus promised.

Many answers could be given but I think the simplest and most profound answer is that Jesus prays for His Church. That's what John 17 is: the Lord's prayer; not the "Our Father..." that we pray. It's quite possible that we misnamed the "Our Father." Maybe it should have been called the disciple's prayer. Be that as it may, John 17 is the Lord's high priestly prayer offered on Maundy Thursday evening. He has washed the disciples' feet, celebrated the Passover and instituted Holy Communion to be celebrated in the Church until His return in glory. It's just a few short hours before His betrayal, arrest and eventual crucifixion on Good Friday. John 17 records our Lord's most powerful intercessory prayer for His beloved Church.

The Church survives and flourishes because Jesus prays for His beloved Church. Today's appointed reading begins in the middle of Jesus' prayer. Turn to vs. 11, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one" (vs. 11b).

This is an extraordinary prayer. Jesus wants His Church to participate in the inner-Trinitarian life shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God the Father gave His name to Jesus. So Jesus gives us His holy name to call upon in every trouble, to pray, praise, and give thanks. And through this holy and sacred name, every Christian believer is brought into the unity of the blessed Trinity. "That they may be one, even as we are one."

God's name is given to each of us most clearly and graciously in the waters of Holy Baptism. We have received the Trinitarian name into which we are brought into the unity of life in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You and I are made one with God and so we are resurrected through the power of God's Word into the eternal life of the God the Holy Trinity. And because we are made one with God, we are made one holy people, Christ's Church.

This is a most profound and glorious mystery. The Church's resurrection life is Trinitarian in shape, form, and content. And every Christian participates in it equally and fully thus uniting us together. As believes in Jesus, we are bound together in an unbreakable chain of unity. You and I are made one with God and subsequently bound together in unity with every other Christian, present, past, and future.

Jesus' prayer that "they may be one, ever as we are one" is answered every time a person comes to faith in Jesus. In other words, the unity Jesus speaks of is a unity of faith. A unity in Baptism, in the Lord's Supper, in the forgiveness of sin, in the Word preached and taught purely. We are joined to Christ by faith when we receive His baptism, His forgiveness, His body and blood; we are brought into union with the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. In this unity of Trinitarian life, we are joined together in union with one another. This is what Jesus prays for and this is what Jesus grants through His gospel.

The most obvious question that arises when considering Jesus' prayer for unity is, "Why does His Church look so divided, so un-unified? Any quick look around will tell you that the Church appears to be anything but one. The Church's disunity is a sad scandal; one that should lead all of us to repentance. The answer to disunity is not

doctrinal laziness or indifference. In vs. 17–19, prays that His Church would be made holy through truth, not error, or indifference, or a least common denomination commitment to His teachings. Listen what Jesus prays, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.” Truth is what unites the Church; the truth that is Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life.

On this side of eternity, we will see division of every sort. There has never been a golden age of unity within the Church, not even during the days of the apostles. The New Testament letters are evidence of a Church contenting against the disunity created by false doctrine and immoral living. You think immorality is a modern problem? Think again. The Corinthian congregation was suffering from within because Christians were taking Christians to court, people were getting drunk in church, a notorious case of incest was celebrated as evidence of the gospel, Christians were eating food offered to pagan idols, and some were visiting the pagan, temple prostitutes! Those were the moral concerns. Theologically, the church was torn by charismatic extremism, a denial of the resurrection from the dead, and a confusion of the proper role men and women have in the life of the church. To all these egregious errors, the apostle Paul calls for repentance. But he never doubts that the Church was present in Corinth.

Our confidence in the reality of “one holy Christian and apostolic church” is not determined by what we see and experience in the day to day life of Christians but by Christ and His prayer offered up to the Father. Christ lived, died and rose again in order to make His Church one. In His holy wounds and triumphant life, the one Church of God will forever live.

And her life together is marked by the gift of joy. Listen to vs. 13, “But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.” Joy is one of those gifts that draws peoples’ attention. The unity given to us in Christ creates a joy which transcends mere happiness and pleasure. Its depth is evidenced by its presence in our lives even during sorrow and suffering. Through faith in Jesus, we are drawn into His joy, the joy He shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Truth combined with joy is a fertile combination that promotes the growth of God’s people and His Church.

And this joyful faith is busy and active; spreading God's love to a broken world. Sharing food and drink in the name of Christ to a person or family in need, bringing our children to be baptized and taught by the Church, giving money to local and world-wide ministries, offering up prayers on behalf of our world, all of these and many other such activities are used by the Father to answer His Son's prayer to reach out to our world with the unifying and saving faith of the gospel. Jesus prays in vs. 18, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them (this refers to the apostles and all believers in Jesus) into the world."

Our Lord spreads His saving message through people—ordinary people like you and me who have problems, sins and setbacks. But we are not alone. Our Lord bathes us with His powerful prayers. Jesus went to the cross for us. And through His glorious resurrection He conquered death's dreaded dominion.

Jesus loves you too much to abandon His most holy people. The last verse from today's gospel text shows His dedication to you, "And for their sake (the apostles and every disciple) I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth." Jesus consecrates Himself, that is, He sets Himself apart for the purpose of offering Himself as a one-time, perfect sacrifice to redeem the world for the degradation of sin, death, and the devil. And because Jesus consecrated, He consecrates us, "that they also may be sanctified in truth."

Dear people of God, you are a most holy and consecrated. You are sanctified and kept secure in God's name, made participants in the life of the Holy Trinity, and preserved in the precious truth of God's holy Word.

How has the Church survived the centuries? Quite simply, Jesus prays for her. How does your faith survive in spite of sin, set back, and opposition? Quite simple, Jesus prays for you. Jesus went through death and the grave to ensure those prayers would be answered. You belong to Jesus. Our joy and faith, our truth and unity are forever established in Jesus.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.