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

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Series C)

May 8, 2016

Text: John 17:20–26

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.

Jesus prays for His Church. That simple truth, Jesus praying for His Church, is good news indeed. For God the Father hears the prayers of His beloved Son and the Son's prayers for the Church are for her eternal good. This past Thursday, May 5th, was the Ascension of Our Lord. We normally observe that great occasion with a dual-parish service at Immanuel. But my attendance at the Doxology conference in Illinois this past week prevented that for this year. We'll try not to let that happen again!

According to Acts 1:3, the resurrected Jesus showed Himself alive by many proofs to His apostles. On the 40th day, Jesus ascended to the Father's right hand where, according to Romans 8:34, He is interceding for us before His heavenly Father. Jesus is praying for His Church collectively and for each member individually. That means the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Jesus prays for you, dear saints of God! He prays for this congregation and for all congregations around the world! Could we ask for a more powerful prayer warrior than the ascended Lord Jesus sitting at the Father's right in power and glory?

John 17, today's gospel reading, reveals the Lord's highly priestly prayer that He prayed just hours before He was betrayed and handed over for crucifixion and resurrection. This great chapter reveals the things that are of utmost importance for Jesus. He prays for His Church in this chapter. Those intercessions continue and will continue until the Lord returns in glory on the Last Day. Take comfort in the fact that Jesus covers us with His prayer.

John 17 is often times called Jesus' high priestly prayer. It's called that because Jesus intercedes for His Church. Vs. 20, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word." "Their word" refers to the preaching and teaching of the apostles. "Their word" continues to be heard and believed 2,000 years

later through the preaching ministry of Word and Sacrament in this place and so many others around the world.

Jesus' prayer has sustained the Church ever since it was offered up to God the Father. When the Church struggles over doctrine, faith, and life, this prayer keeps her going. When the Church is being attacked by enemies from within and without, this prayer continues to be answered by the Father almighty. The only reason anyone remains in the Christian faith at all is because Jesus prays for them. Jesus told Simon Peter that He had prayed for him so that his faith would not fail. "And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32). It was the Jesus' prayer that brought Peter back to saving faith.

Think about how important prayer is for you in your personal life. When you're sick or troubled, you seek the prayers of your fellow Christians. How important it is for parents to pray for their children, and also for children to learn to pray for their parents. What better Mother's Day gift could children give their mom's then prayer for them day and every day? Husband and wives praying for each other is so absolutely essential. Husbands, pray for your wives today, the mother of your children!! (And take them out to dinner or whatever special recognition you might have in mind.)

Every Sunday we pray for all people according to their needs such as our political and church leaders, those who are suffering or are sick, the Church here and scattered throughout the world, Christians who suffer for confessing Christ's name, for people without jobs, homes, and on it goes. Those prayers aren't offered just to fill the time. We believe they are heard and that God will act on them according to His good and gracious will. We pray because Jesus commands us to pray. More importantly, we pray because Jesus always prays with us.

And for what does Jesus pray? The Church's success, her programs, her buildings? No. Jesus prays for the Church's oneness, her unity in Him and each other. That's what important, that she be united together as one people in Jesus. Vs. 21, Jesus prays, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." According to Jesus, the Church is to be unified even as God the Son is unified in God the Father.

If there is one thing about the Church that receives the greatest ridicule from the world, it's her many sad divisions. We can't simply ignore it or pretend it isn't there.

The tens of thousands of denominations and groups within the Church are injurious to the cause of Christ. For they all claim to know the truth. They all claim to worship Jesus. All while quoting the same Bible. And confusion, ridicule, and doubt flourish because of it.

It was never the intention of our 16th century Lutheran fathers to create a new denomination. By the way, you can't create a new Church. There's only one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church created by Christ through His blessed Word. But those early Lutherans always wanted Church unity. But it must be true, Biblical unity and not some make-believe unity built on a foundation of straw. So if you hear someone suggest that we fussy o' Lutherans don't care about the wider Church, you can set them straight instantly.

The unity that Jesus prays for is mysterious, for lack of a better word, almost as mysterious as the Trinity itself. That's what the Church's unity is based upon, the unity found in the Holy Trinity. Did you catch that? Jesus prayed, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us..." (vs. 21).

To begin with, the Church's unity is an article of faith that IS NOT and CAN NOT be grasped by human reason or observation. Again, let's think in terms of the Holy Trinity. The Son is God. The Father is God. The Holy Spirit is God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are unified in their divine nature; the Bible declares that there is one God. But the Bible also teaches that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons. So, we BELIEVE that the God of Bible, whom we worship and adore with joy and gladness, is One God in three distinct persons. God the Holy Trinity is unified, yet distinct. Human reason doesn't teach us this about God's unity and distinctness, only the sacred Scriptures. And we BELIEVE it by faith.

The same must be said about the unity of the Church. It is an article of faith that is BELIEVED not observed or measured. The Church's unity is found only in her connection to Jesus. "I in them" Jesus said in vs. 23. What we believe about the Church is that she is unified in Jesus. Where Jesus is, there is unity. But it's BELIEVED, not seen or measured, or quantified.

Based upon human observation you must sadly conclude that the Church is anything but united. But we believe that every Christian is united together in Christ even as Jesus is one with the Father. It's a unity of faith created solely in Jesus through His

Word and Sacraments. And that's why preaching Jesus cannot be abandoned for even a moment. The glory that Jesus prays for us to see (vs. 24) is found only in His death, resurrection, ascension, and return on the Last Day. God's glory isn't found in our buildings, programs, and budgets but in the Word preached, the Sacraments given, and Jesus' love manifested in the lives of His people. Through them, Word, Sacraments, and love, we are united to Christ in His death and resurrection – His glory – and with each another.

The unity that Jesus prays for has a holy, divine purpose. Twice Jesus prays, “that the world may believe that you have sent me” (vs. 21, 23). Jesus also adds “and loved them even as you loved me” (vs. 23). The Church's unity finds concrete expression in a congregation like Immanuel/St. John's. And by being united to Jesus, we share with each other Christ's love. Jesus said, “I made know to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn. 17:26).

To that end, dear saints, give constant attention to loving one another with the love that you have received in Christ. Pray for one another. Encourage one another especially those struggling with their faith or those who may be tempted to fall away from the wholesome purity of Christ's preached Gospel and life-giving Sacraments. Reach out to visitors with genuine care. Open your hearts and lives to one another with Christ's love. For the unity we have with Christ and one another forms the very heart and core of everything we do as a Church.

Dear saints of our Lord, together you are unified in Jesus. Our Lord prays for our unity. He creates unity in His Church through His sacrificial love. You are the Church of Christ. Stand secure and joyous in the truth that Jesus prays for you individually, for this congregation, and for His beloved Church, now and into eternity.

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.