

The Seventh Sunday of Easter (May 16, 2021) Text: John 17:6-19
“The Lord’s Prayer (for Us)”

Every time I’m in a group that chooses to close its time together praying the Lord’s Prayer, I am reminded an old joke. Two salesmen were discussing religion at a bar and one of them mentioned the Lord’s Prayer. The other said, *“Aw, who you kidding. you don’t know the Lord’s Prayer.”* The first one replied, *“I do so. I learned it as a kid.”* *“Yeah? I got twenty bucks says you can’t say the Lord’s Prayer right now.”* *“I’ll take that bet. ‘Now I lay me down to sleep . . .’”* *“Here’s your twenty. I thought for sure you didn’t know it.”*

What we label “The Lord’s Prayer” might better be labeled “The Disciples’ Prayer,” for indeed Jesus gave it to us as a model for our praying. We call it the Lord’s Prayer because of its authorship; but the prayer that Jesus prays, a part of which is recorded as today’s Gospel, might better fit the description, “The Lord’s Prayer.” Bible scholars usually refer to it as “The High Priestly Prayer of Jesus.” It is, indeed, our Lord — praying for us!

The first thing Jesus prays for us is, ***“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”***

One great gift of our Baptisms is that we now bear the name of Christ. It is a practice among many Christians to adopt, or receive, a new name at Baptism. This is a reminder that Baptism made a significant change in that person’s life. We need to go several steps further in our appreciation of what it means to bear the Name of Jesus.

First, it is a matter of identity. We who bear the name of Christ are therefore identified with Christ. We are joined to Him . . . abide in Him . . . live in Him . . . all we are is tied up in Christ. It is who we are. We are “in Christ” (and I challenge you to go through the Epistles of St. Paul to see how often he uses that phrase, “in Christ,” and yes, that is a not so sneaky way to try to get you to read your Bible). Jesus prays that this status be protected. He will pray about one source of threat a bit later;

but right now we need to consider why Jesus feels it necessary to pray for the protection of our identity.

Identity theft is a huge crime statistic these days. You have to be very careful that you use variable access codes, shield your PIN number when you are at the ATM, shred any documents that have your name and other information that someone else could use to pass themselves off as you. We know that such theft of identity is more than an inconvenience or loss of a few dollars. People have been arrested, refused access to airplanes, denied jobs because someone else took away their identity. It is an especially cruel crime. So we have learned to make every reasonable (and perhaps some not so reasonable) efforts to protect our identities.

Do we protect our identity in Christ with equal fervor? Jesus asks the Father to protect us in His name, which tells us that it may well be out of our hands. Yet, I think, we can, at the very least, not succumb to the temptation to place our identity is something other than Christ.

Men are especially prone to identify themselves by their occupations (although I suspect it is a growing trend with women also). When we are sick, we tend to identify ourselves by whatever illness has beset us. When life's troubles descend on us, we are inclined to think of ourselves as only what is going on — laid off, unemployed, poor (or at least poorer than this time last year). Whenever we give in to these inclinations, we step out of our identity in Christ, and open ourselves to fear, anxiety, and eventually unfaith.

When we choose to trust in the fact that we are baptized into the Name of Christ, we can live in the power of Jesus resurrection. That is who we are. This, in turn, ties us to one another. You are joined to Christ . . . I am joined to Christ . . . consequently there is a “we” joined to Christ.

Jesus emphasizes in His prayer how deeply He desires the Father to protect our unity “ . . . *that they may be one, as we are one.*” This is no superficial “like-think” or common cause — this is unity, a blending, oneness. Yet we, in the Church, often function as if faith were solitary,

commitments isolated, oneness a noble idea, but “come on.” Jesus knows all too well how important it is that this unity not only be affirmed, but embraced. And He knows full well that this cannot and will not happen unless the Father sends His Spirit to foster and nourish our unity.

The second thing Jesus prays for: ***“I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.”***

This is that other threat from which we need protection. Many in our world today have been convinced that, not only is there no such thing as the devil, the evil one — they have also become convinced that if you believe there is a such a creature, you are stupid at the very least and may well be deranged. This so-called “scientific outlook” has been brewing ever since the Enlightenment, from which all matters that are not empirically verifiable are relegated to the realm of the ridiculous.

On the other hand, there are those who see a demon in every tree, behind every bush, and in a lot of the people they confront. There was an account on the ABC Evening News awhile back about churches in Africa that are labeling children as witches and performing cruel exorcisms that left the children traumatized and ostracized from their village and family. The newscast placed the blame on a greedy pastor who charged exorbitant amounts to rid the child of the demon of witchcraft (and that may well be); but it may also be a genuine misunderstanding about the power and presence of the demonic.

C. Peter Wagner has said, *“I do not believe there is a demon in every bush. But if there is a demon in that bush, I want to know it and know what to do about it.”* First, the evil one is powerful, but he is not all-powerful. *“Demons,”* writes Charles Kraft, *“are like rats. They feed on garbage. Get rid of the garbage and they will die or leave.”* What protects us from the evil one is the cleansing of the garbage in our lives — and that is absolutely tied into our identity in Christ.

You are not a gambler . . . an alcoholic . . . a sex addict . . . a gossip . . . a racist . . . a petty thief . . . an abuser of persons. You may, in fact, be

guilty of one or all of those evil behaviors, and maybe some that you would absolutely die of embarrassment if I were to mention them today because it would come too close to home, and there may be some that you have been involved in so long that you no longer consider them to be anything like evil (because we can all find justification for what we really want to do), and they may be labeled as addictive (and lest you look down your nose at that term, Gerald May reminds us “*We are all addicted.*”) — but even they are not who you are.

That’s the garbage that you allow into your life. The demonic feeds on that. Confession is taking out the garbage. Jesus prays to the Father not that we be taken out of the world — after all we have important business, His business, to attend to — He prays that we be protected from the rats that feed on our garbage. We pick up that garbage when we listen to the world instead of to Christ and the Spirit. We cannot avoid exposure to garbage. That does not mean that we have to wallow in it. Luther once said, “*You cannot keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.*”

So take out the garbage . . . but then you need also to work at keeping the garbage out. That’s where the disciplines of the Spirit come into play — prayer, fasting, meditation, scripture reading, group interaction — all of these are garbage resisters. We need to take this with utmost seriousness . . . our Lord certainly did.

The third thing Jesus prays for us is, “***Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.***”

That word “sanctify” — ἁγιαζο (agiadzo) in Greek, is tied to the adjective ἅγιος (agios), “holy.” Brian Stoffregen raises a valid question when he asks, “*Can ‘being weird’ be similar to ‘being sanctified’?*” He goes on to answer his own question: “*Being called ‘weird’ is a compliment if it's because you won't go to parties where alcohol is served (for the youth) or abused (for adults). Being called ‘weird’ is a compliment if it's because you won't use illegal drugs or abuse legal drugs. Being called ‘weird’ is a compliment if it's because you want to*

wait until marriage to be sexually involved. Being called 'weird' is a compliment if it's because you would rather go to church on Sunday morning than sleep in or to stay out too late on Saturday night. Being called 'weird' is a compliment if it's because you won't shop-lift or steal or vandalize other's property. Being called 'weird' is a compliment if it's because you honor and respect your father and mother — and want to do what they say — at least some of the time. Being called 'weird' is a compliment if it's because you are content not to go along with the crowd, because you know who you are and whose you are. You are Christians — children of God. You belong to God, not to the world. You don't have to be like everyone else. You can dare to be different — not just to be different, but to be weird because you belong to God and not to the world.”

Joined to Christ we are declared by God in Baptism to be “holy.” That is who we are; it is part of our identity. But now we need to grow into that identity; we need constantly to be sanctified. Because sin enters (we are inveterate garbage collectors), we come to doubt our identity as Christ’s. Which cranks up the cycle of fear, anxiety, deeper enmeshment in sin, more anxiety, more cover-up. We forget who we are. Or we fail to live what we know ourselves to be. We don’t want to be “weird.” In those moments we need to be sanctified.

That does not mean that we need or should want to be overtly pious or super-religious — indeed it means just the opposite. To be sanctified means to be “made holy” — not that we become holy. Whenever we try to “become holy” we almost surely will succumb to pride, which is a denial of truth. Jesus prays that we be sanctified in truth and then pinpoints the source of that truth: God’s Word. God’s Word speaks truth into us: the truth that we are sinners (garbage collectors); the truth that we are Christ’s (our identity).

We confuse that truth with all manner of falsehoods — so we need constantly to go back to the source and, by the Spirit’s power, regain the truth. It is an unending process, and one to which we must commit

ourselves daily.

This is our Lord's Prayer for us. Like that "other" Lord's Prayer, Jesus bids us pray with Him. Like Jesus, we should pray for one another. Pray that our identity in Christ be secured and mature. Pray for protection from the evil one and the evil that is all around us. Pray for the truth to be spoken into our hearts constantly, unendingly, lovingly.

Christ has not stopped praying for us. Paul reminds us that Christ is at the right hand of God interceding for us (Romans 8:34). We have this assurance that Jesus prays for us. Which means, first of all, that we are in need of prayer. We can't do it by ourselves. Secondly, we are guaranteed help from God. How could the Father refuse the Son's requests?

However, we may not always want God's help that Jesus has requested. We may want to be part of the world, rather than hated by the world. We may want to stay in our own "safe" areas, rather than to be sent into the world. We may want to keep what we imagine to be our individual identities, rather than wanting the unity that becomes our witness to the world.

Do we want Jesus praying for us? If so, we need to listen carefully to what He has requested from God. We need to prepare ourselves for God to answer — and then to become the answer God chooses.

Amen.