

Sermon -- 4th Sunday in Lent
(03/19/23)

Text – John 17:1-26

Theme -- “Jesus Prays”

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

Thus far in our look at St. John’s account of Christ’s Passion in our Lenten sermons, we have been with our Lord and His disciples in the Upper Room. We have heard of how He washed their feet after instituting the Lord’s Supper. We listened as Jesus predicted all that was to happen, including Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial. We heard how Jesus declared Himself to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life. How Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit, who would guide them into all Truth. We heard Jesus say that He is the Vine and we are the branches, who bear fruit that pleases and glorifies God. He reminded us that the world will hate us, just as it hates Him. And then, last Wednesday, we heard Him promise that the disciples (and we) would see Him again, after a “*little while*”.

Today, we move from that Upper Room in the city, out to Gethsemane -- a quiet garden of olive trees -- where Jesus prays. You heard that prayer in our Gospel reading, a few moments ago. A prayer which included petitions for Himself, for those apostles, and for us. A prayer of such intensity that, according to St. Luke the physician, our Lord sweated “*great drops as of blood*”. A prayer to His heavenly Father, from the depths of His soul. (pause)

Prayer is communication -- one half of a conversation -- with God. He speaks to us in His Word, and we respond in prayer. But remember this: Jesus IS the Word of God. So, when Jesus prays, it is rather unique. It is kind of like talking to yourself. He knows perfectly what His Father wills and wants. And He, as the perfect Son, desires to do it. Yet, what His Father wills is

the Son's death – His literally going through hell. And that is frightening, even for Jesus. Indeed, since He knows precisely what hell is (while we have only a limited understanding of it) you might say that Jesus suffers even more than we do at the thought. So, what does He do? He prays.

First, He prays for Himself. He prays for strength to carry out His mission. He prays that He might glorify the Father by what He is soon to endure. He prays that His Father might bring Him safely through it all.

That Jesus would pray for Himself is revealing. And, maybe, unexpected. I mean, Jesus is God and so we tend not to think of Him needing such help. But He does. He does, because He is also fully human. Like you and me. We need to rely on God for everything. He is the One who created (and creates still). He is the One who sustains His creation – and so, the sun shines, the rain falls, the plants grow only because He wills it. He is the One who loves even those who reject Him – think of how Christ continued to love Judas, or how He wept over Jerusalem, or how He keeps inviting unbelievers to faith. He is the One who accomplishes our salvation. He is the One who makes that salvation ours, and who keeps us in the faith. We totally need God. For the First Article gifts of life and earthly existence. For the Second Article gifts of redemption. For the Third Article gifts of making us His own again.

And so, Jesus, as a Man, also needs His Father's love. Thus, He prays for Himself. And, by so praying, He also indirectly prays for us – for without Christ's fulfilling what His Father sent Him to do, we have NO hope. (pause)

Then, after that prayer for Himself, Jesus prays for the disciples. He knows how lost and confused they already are – and how that will only intensify and increase once He is taken from them. When He is arrested, they will scatter and hide like frightened children. They will be easy prey for Satan's attacks. They will be filled with **doubt**: about Christ, about God, about

themselves. They will be filled with **questions**: why had God let the Messiah suffer so? Why did Jesus not resist? Were they wrong – and the Jewish leaders right – all along? They will be filled with **fear**: fear for Jesus but, even more, fear for themselves. And Jesus will not be there to pull them up, to answer their questions, to steady and strengthen them.

The Twelve (or Eleven, with Judas gone over to the “other side”) will need help. And the only way Jesus can give them that help is this: to pray for them now. He begins by reminding His Father that He (the Father) had given these men to Him as disciples. The Father, then, has a responsibility for their welfare and safety. And, Jesus says, they have listened to His Word, they have **obeyed** that Word. Now, that’s interesting, considering how often they have stumbled and fallen in their time with Jesus. You all know what I mean: how they misunderstand what Christ’s Kingdom is, why He has come, what it means to be great in that kingdom. How they are puzzled by His parables. How they try to exclude some people from Jesus (for instance, like the sick, or Gentiles, or children, or women with “evil” reputations). How they even argue with Jesus and try to prevent Him from going to the cross.

But, still, Jesus says they are His. And so, He prays for them. What a relief that is for us! For, truth be told, don’t we do exactly those same things as the disciples? Haven’t we heard Jesus and His Gospel, and still questioned it? Tried to limit it? Failed to understand it? Of course, we have! We are sinful people. Stubborn people. Proud people. And so, we need Jesus to pray for us, just as He prayed for the Twelve.

Jesus continues His prayer by saying:

I have given them Your Word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the Evil One. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

We talked about this last Sunday, when Jesus told the disciples that the world would hate them,

just as it hated Him. And here, Jesus prays for the apostles for that very reason. Jesus knows first-hand that hatred. Indeed, as we heard Him say last week, the reason the world hates Christians is because it hates Christ. And the world is a very formidable foe, indeed.

Just as the world hated – and even killed – Christ, so it will hate and kill the disciples. It's true. Every single one of them is killed for the faith, except for John. And even he is exiled and persecuted and attacked for that faith. Peter is crucified upside down; Andrew on an X-shaped cross. James — John's brother — is murdered by one of the many Herods in the Bible. The other James was first stoned, and then clubbed to death. "Doubting" Thomas was killed by a spear while evangelizing India. And so on. Yes, the world DOES hate the apostles. Because the world hates Jesus, and the world hates His Gospel.

And the apostles, as strong as their faith was, were often afraid of the world and its hatred. Not just in the time between Good Friday and Easter (although especially then), but always. After all, they were human too. And, like us, when the world came after them, they knew fear. But Jesus *prays* for them. And, in that prayer, they are sustained and strengthened. They DO have the Father's presence and power given them. And in THAT they will stand. In THAT, they will conquer.

So it is with us too. The world hates us as Christians. We had better face up to that fact. It always has, and it always will. And it will attack us, just as it attacked Christ, just as it attacked the apostles. It may even kill us, as it did them. But we have the promise of God to keep us through it all. To bring us safely to Himself. To conquer, even as did our Lord.

Jesus also prayed that His Father not take the Twelve "*out of the world*", but to protect them from the Evil One. That is His prayer for us too. We ARE in the world. We must be, because this is where God has work for us to do. To be His agents and servants, just as were the

apostles. To speak and act for Him. To show forth His love. To bring the Good News of salvation in Christ Jesus to others – in our family, in our community, and throughout the world. And just as He has called us to do that, so He will keep us in that work. That is Jesus' prayer for you, and so it must be. (pause)

First, Jesus prayed for Himself and the work His Father sent Him to do. Then, He prayed for the Twelve and the work He would send *them* to do as His apostles and evangelists. And then, He finishes His prayer by praying for us -- those who will know Jesus through their preaching and teaching. He prays:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

How wonderful to know that, even as He was about to go to the cross for us, Jesus remembered each of us – and prayed for us! Himself, sure. Praying for the apostles — *that* we can understand. But you and me? Yet, it is true! *That's* how precious and beloved you are by God. You matter **THAT** much to Him. And, really, that should not surprise us when we keep in mind that this same love led Him to the cross. So, why would He NOT remember us in His prayer?

And for what does He pray, for us? That we may be one, just as He and the Father are one. But are we? The temptation is for us to look at the Church – all Christians – and say that we are not. How many different Christian denominations are there? How many different ***Lutheran*** denominations are there? Why, how many different factions and parties and cliques are there in just one congregation? Or even one family?

But that is to miss the reality. Listen to what we confess in the Creed: “...*I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church...*” There really IS only one Church. Because there is only ONE Lord. And so, all Christians ARE one, because we are united and joined to Him: one with (and in) Him.

Oh, those divisions within the Church on earth are real. But, by the grace of God, He does not allow such things to sever us from Christ. As St. Paul says, there is ONE Lord, ONE faith, ONE baptism. So, if we are one with Christ, then we **must** be one with each other. And we are. Even though we acknowledge our very real differences here, we also confess that those differences will not exist in eternity. Then we will have that unity which now eludes us because of our sinful weaknesses and folly. Your Catholic cousin, your Episcopalian neighbor, your Pentecostal boss, your Baptist friend, your Methodist co-worker – and Lutheran you – we will ALL be together in the life to come. Together, because we ARE one in (and with) Christ. (pause)

On the night in which He was betrayed, our Lord Jesus...prayed. And His Father answered. Christ DID finish the work He was sent to do. The apostles WERE kept from the world, so that they might witness what they had heard and seen. And you too are blessed by that prayer, as you remain one with all Christians, and with our Lord Himself. Prayer made; prayer answered. Thanks be to God! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS – Nicene Creed
FE – Offertory/Offering