

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one:²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴ “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

²⁵ “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me.²⁶ I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” (John 17:20-26)

Jesus Prays for Us

People often ask me, “Pastor, pray for me.” Why do they ask that? I hope it’s because we understand that God promises to hear and answer the prayers of all believers and that he calls all of us to pray for each other. But sometimes I fear that we get the idea that pastors are closer to God than other people, so God pays more attention to our prayers. Nothing could be further from the truth. We pastors are sinners, just like you are. Our sin, just like yours, forms a barrier between us and God, a barrier that stops all prayer from reaching him. But like he has done for you, Jesus has taken away all our sin and the barrier that goes with it. So now, God listens to us pastors, too. So my prayers are really no more special or powerful than your prayers are, although I am happy to pray for you, just as I hope that you will pray for me and for my family. But this morning, in our gospel lesson, **Jesus Christ himself prays for us**. On the night before he died, our Savior approached his heavenly Father on our behalf. That is something special and powerful.

I.

Jesus prays for us. He prays for us to have true unity. He said, **“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.”** In the verses right before this, Jesus prayed for his eleven remaining disciples. But then he prayed for all those who would believe as a result of their message. That includes us. Because he was the Son of God, on that very day, Jesus knew all of us by name. He knew who he was dying for. And he was indeed praying for you and me.

What did he ask for us? **“That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.”** God hates the divisions that plague the Christian Church on earth. He wants us to be one, just like he and his Father are one. How closely united are Jesus and his Father? Obviously, they are one in a deeper sense, in the sense of being two persons of the same Godhead, the Trinity.

But they are also one in other ways. They are one in love. Jesus is God’s only begotten Son. The Father loves him as only a Father can. And the Son loves the Father with all his being. That’s why he submitted to the Father’s plan to come and die for us. That unity of love points to another way that they are one: they have the same purpose. God the Father wants to save the world. God the Son shares that purpose and desire. So he left his throne in heaven and became man in the womb of the Virgin Mary and he was about to lay down his life so that all our sin is paid for. There is still another way in which the Father and the Son are perfectly united. They are one in doctrine. Jesus told his followers that if they held to his teaching they would really be his disciples. The teaching Jesus gave them is the very one he received from his Father.

Jesus asked God to give us true unity: unity of love, unity of purpose, and unity of doctrine. Of course, God the Father wants us to have that unity. When we look around the world we live in – even when we look around our own congregation – it may seem like the unity that Jesus asked for is impossible to achieve in this world. How can we get it? Jesus tells us: **“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me.”** A couple of weeks ago, we talked about Jesus’ glory. I told you then that Jesus’ greatest glory is his love, specifically, the love that drove him to the cross for our sins. His glory is the eternal life he won for us. So his glory is the gospel, the announcement that our sins are forgiven, that God has given us heaven for no other reason than that he loved us.

In just a matter of hours, Jesus would show how great that love was when he let himself be nailed to a cross where God the Father would pour hell itself out on his head so that we don't have to suffer that hell. We have that gospel, that glory. Because we have that glorious message, we are one. In that message, Christ is in us. Since Christ is true God, one with the Father, the Father is in him when Christ is in us. So the Father, too, is in us. That makes us one.

The gospel makes us one in teaching. All our doctrine is given by God. The gospel makes us one in purpose. The only reason for our congregation – indeed for the Christian Church – to exist is to proclaim that message. Some days, I do it in the hospital before or after a surgery. Some days, I and our teachers proclaim it in the classroom. Some days, I hear your confession and assure you that Jesus has forgiven you or I listen to your fears and remind you of all God's promises. Some days, we hear those promises at a funeral, some days, at a wedding. Some days, we apply water and the word to a baby – or an adult – and witness the miracle of Holy Baptism. And some days, we sit down with people who don't know about Jesus and tell them the good news. But on all those days, the purpose is the same: to proclaim the gospel of Christ.

Through that gospel message, God makes us one in love. He changes our hearts and ties us together. The love of Christ on the cross that won forgiveness for us leads us to forgive each other. The love God had for us strangers leads us to welcome new members and to treasure people that we only see here. In the gospel, we are one, not just with each other here, but with all Christians on earth. All Christians share the love that God gave us. All Christians share the purpose that Christ entrusted to us. All Christians share the one true teaching that God has revealed to us in the Scripture.

The gospel how we get true unity – and it's the only way. But how do we break it? We break our unity when we fail to love each other as Christ loved us. When we're thoughtless and selfish and hurt each other, but also when we hold grudges. We break the unity Jesus gives us when we lose sight of the true purpose of the Church. It's not to run a Lutheran Elementary School, even though that is a tremendous blessing from God. It's not to have fellowship activities. It's not even to keep our kids off drugs or to teach us to live right. The true purpose of the Church is to proclaim Christ and when we make it about what we want or what we feel is important, we sin against that unity. Finally, we sin against the unity Jesus prayed for, when we depart from the true teachings of Scripture. Every false doctrine is unbelief. Some false doctrines are so powerful that you cannot hold them and still be a Christian. If you don't believe Jesus is the Son of God, you are not a Christian, no matter how long you've been a member of a church. But some false doctrines only put cracks in our unity with Christ. By the grace of God, you can be confused about what baptism really does and still believe that Jesus is your Savior. You will go to heaven. But on this side of heaven, the cracks between us and Christ cause cracks in our unity with each other. False doctrine does divide us.

In the end, our own pride and sin causes every kind of division. Every one of us has to take responsibility for our share in that division. We all have an old Adam who hates the truth, who hates the purpose God gave the Church, who hates other believers. That sinner inside us drives us to false doctrine or to pride in our pure doctrine. It drives us to put our purpose ahead of God's. It drives us to love ourselves first and foremost. That sin deserves nothing but God's judgment of death and then hell.

Jesus knew that in the Garden of Gethsemane. So he prayed for us. He prayed that God would overcome our sin and reach out through the good news of his love and give us true unity. Then he went to the cross and he paid for all our pride and sin. He paid for all the times that we loved ourselves first and all the times we failed to follow God's purpose and all the times we wanted his teachings to be different from what they are. He died and paid for all our sin and then he rose and announced that all that sin is gone and we are free. And in that announcement, God gives us true unity. The Church will never be completely reunited on this side of heaven, but the more we grow in our understanding of that gospel message – in our heads and in our hearts – the more unity we will have.

II.

So Jesus paid special attention to the content of that message. **Jesus prays for us. He prays for us to know his name. Jesus prayed, "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."**

Jesus says that he has made God known to the disciples and that he will continue to make him known. All by itself, that's a striking statement. But the Greek is even more striking. Jesus literally says, "I have made

your name known to them and I will continue to make it known.” How could he say that? His disciples were Jews. God gave the Jewish people his true name – in fact, he even gave them a commandment, “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.” These men had grown up hearing that name. They didn’t need Jesus to teach it to them.

But they did need Jesus to completely revamp their understanding of that name so that they really understood the Father. God’s name is more than just the names and titles the Bible uses. It certainly does include them. But God’s name is everything that he reveals about himself. God’s name is the gospel and the law. It’s all the doctrines of Scripture. Jesus did what the Jewish religious establishment of his day failed to do: he revealed the truth of God to these men.

That tells us something about attaining the unity our Lord prayed for. It comes from teaching. It comes from doctrine. Now, by that I don’t mean that you can learn to parrot the right doctrines at the right times and then live any way you want to. Faith is more than just head knowledge. God wants our lives and our lips to line up with our hearts and our minds. But you cannot live what you do not know. Again and again, when God calls us to grow in grace and in love, he tells us to grow in knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Doctrine, teaching, is God’s way of reaching through our minds into our hearts and leading us to follow him. We live in a world that doesn’t think that doctrine is all that important. We live in a world that teaches us that what you do and what you feel is all that matters. But God disagrees. What you teach and what you confess and what you believe are at the heart of how you live. They even change how you feel.

Jesus came to teach us God’s name, to teach us to know God correctly. He came to teach us the truth. As we grow in the truth, we grow in our unity. That is what Jesus prayed for: that we might be one. Certainly, he calls us to be one, to be united in purpose and love and doctrine here at Peace and throughout the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. But he also prayed that God would grant that unity to the entire Church on earth. He prayed for the triumph of the gospel over our sinful hearts. Every day that we confess the truth and teach the truth and help each other to know and follow the truth, God is working to answer Jesus’ prayer. But full unity will not come on this side of heaven. In a way, that underscores how precious this gift really will be. It’s more rare than diamonds. It’s harder to get than a medical degree. It’s worth our efforts and Jesus’ prayers. When we reach heaven and we are at last perfectly united with each other and with all Christians who have ever lived, it will be a greater joy than I can express this morning. But until we get there, let us work for that unity, not by downplaying differences, but by loving and forgiving, by focusing on the true work of the Church: the gospel, and by teaching and confessing the truth. And let us pray for God to grant it. Amen.