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Calvary Lutheran Church, Brookfield, WI
Wednesday of Lent 5C; April 1, 2020
John 17:19–23; Ephesians 4:17–32

In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this fifth week of Lent, we are continuing through what the Church has often called the High Priestly Prayer. In the first week, Kyle Jones began this series of Lenten sermons, and he preached about the unity that we have in Christ Jesus. This unity is a gift, and through this gift of unity we are united to one another because we are all united to Jesus Christ.

In the second week of Lent, Lynnae Douglas preached about the significance of the fact that Christ is praying. In all of Holy Scripture, there are only a few places where we are given insight into the relationship between the Father and the Son. This relationship of love between God the Father and God the Son existed before creation, it has literally been going on forever and ever. But in this passage we are given, as it were, a little peek behind the curtain that is the drama of eternity, we are given a little glimpse behind the veil that separates creation from its Creator. And what do we see behind the curtain? Behind this veil we do not see a terrible God, who cares not about the going-on in this world. Behind this curtain we see Christ the eternal Son of God and God the eternal Father, these two are talking about *us*. Behind this curtain we see eternal and infinite and perfect love.

In this passage, written down for our instruction and for our encouragement, we see that what is on the mind of God when they speak together is their creation. In light of what has happened in the last few weeks, in light of the spread of this new deadly pestilence, Lynnae's sermon seems like forever ago. But is not this more comforting now than it seemed then? Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, when he speaks to his Father, he speaks about us, he shows his concern and care for us—weak and lowly creatures that we are. This is no less true today than it was when Lynnae preached, no less true today when we are all sheltering in our homes, worrying about when we go out of our homes, concerned for our neighbors, concerned for our loved ones, and for ourselves. If we were to get a peek behind the curtain now we would see something much like what we have heard in this passage: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are concerned about us—indeed, more concerned about us than we ever could be about ourselves. Their eyes are upon us.

And last week we heard Rev. Mark Knappe preach about the church's true identity politics. Our identity is given to us in holy Baptism. In the rite for baptism we are told that we are made members of the household of God, we made into a

kingdom of priests, we are made into a holy people. This is our identity, given to us, granted to us.

This evening, all of these themes are repeated in Christ's words, in Christ's prayer to his Father on our behalf. But before each of these themes is recapitulated, Jesus speaks one little line that puts all of this in a new light, in a new key. Jesus, speaking about all of those for whom he prays, says this: "For their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth" (John 17:19, RSV). Jesus consecrates himself for us. This means that Jesus is making himself *holy* for us, he is sanctifying himself, setting himself apart for us. But, this is the eternal Son of the Father that we are talking about. This is the Word of God made flesh. This is the Holy One of Israel who has made himself to be part of Israel. Is it not more than just a bit strange that he would say that he makes himself *holy*? Is it not the case that Jesus has been holy, literally, forever? Well, yes he has. But here we are given a little insight into the reason why the Word of God was made flesh in the first place. The Word of God was made flesh, not for his own sake, but for ours. The Word of God took on flesh, not because he lacked anything, but because we lacked something. And here in our passage we learn precisely what it was that we lacked. We lacked *consecration*, we lacked *holiness*.

But here we are in danger of misunderstanding what this means. When Scripture speaks about holiness, it is not merely referring to morality. It is not only speaking about what we do or do not do, or what we think and do not think. It includes morality—our actions and our thoughts. But when Scripture speaks about holiness, it is much wider than this, and it is also much deeper. When Scripture speaks about holiness, it is primarily concerned about a particular relationship. So in our passage, when Jesus says that he is consecrating himself, or making himself holy, he is saying that he is establishing a new relationship. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, had always been holy. But now he is holy *for us*, he is making himself holy *for our sakes*. Hear again what he said in his prayer to his Father: "*for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth*" (John 17:19, RSV). Jesus Christ makes himself holy, so that his holiness, his righteousness, his moral perfection might too might be holy and righteous and perfect.

But, it remains to be asked, how do we become holy and righteous and perfect with Jesus? This is what Jesus goes on to pray for next. Jesus prays, "I do not pray for these only," that is, Jesus is not praying just for the disciples that were around him that day in Israel, "but also," Jesus goes on to say, "but also for those who believe in me through their word" (John 17:20, RSV). Martin Luther says about this verse that it should be written in gold letters. He says this because up until now in this prayer, all of it could have been understood as just a prayer for those first disciples. But no longer is that possible. Jesus is praying for all who hear the word of the disciples. This is why it is so important that, in the Nicene Creed, we confess that the church is *apostolic*. The Church is apostolic because it proclaims the same gospel, the same *word*,

that the apostles preached. And when the church does this, we are included in those for whom Jesus prays. Jesus is praying for us in this passage.

In Colossians 3, Saint Paul instructs the people of God to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spirituals songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (v. 16, RSV). The Word of Christ is to dwell in the whole church, not just in the first disciples, not just in those who are pastors and priests, or who are called to preach and teach. The word of Christ is to dwell in the whole church, for it is through this Word that Christ himself dwells in the Church. Where Christ’s word is faithfully proclaimed, Christ is there with all of his grace. For, remember, Christ simply *is* the Word of God. When you hear the Word of God preached, you hear Christ. Right now we are all unable to come together, to gather around this table and feast on Christ. But, this Word can still dwell in us. When you sing hymns at home, when you read the psalms, when you teach one another about the Word of God, you are letting this word dwell in you richly, and you are fulfilling what Christ prayed to his Father for, and Christ is with you.

And when this word dwells in us, when we believe in Jesus because of the Word that we hear, then we are made one with each other. This is what Kyle preached about several weeks ago. Jesus prays: “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:20–21, RSV). When we believe in Christ, when we receive his Word, we are made one with one another just as Christ is one with his Father. Our hearts and our minds are united, our wills are joined together. We come to hope for the same thing, we join our hands in working together for the same thing. And, just as Christ is doing here, we come together in prayer. These are all things that we do, and they are important. But our unity, our oneness, goes even deeper than the level of action. For the Father and the Son don’t just work together. The Father and the Son above all share a bond of love.

Now, at this point, you might be wondering where the Spirit of God is in this prayer. The Father and the Son are one, but where is the Holy Spirit? Why is the Spirit left out of this, is the Spirit not one with the Father and Son? The Spirit is not absent. Indeed, the best answer to these questions is to say that the love that is shared between the Father and the Son simply is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is not left out of this prayer because the Spirit is the one who joins the Father and the Son in love, who is the love between Father and Son. How the Holy Spirit can be the love between the Father and his Son Jesus Christ we cannot fathom. But this we know, this same Spirit has been given to all of the baptized. This same Spirit is given to us when we hear his word, when this word dwells in us.

And just as Jesus and his Father did not simply keep their Spirit between them, but shared it, just as the Father and his Son give us their love and make us one with

one another and with them, this Spirit of God is not just given to us so that we might keep their love to ourselves. When we are one with one another, just as the Father and Son are one, the result is that the world will believe that Jesus was sent from the Father. Jesus prayed, “even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:21, RSV). When the church is united, in the same way that the Father and the Son are united, the result is that the world will believe. At the end of our reading for this evening, Jesus goes on to pray, “the glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me” (John 17:22–23, RSV). The Father and Son have given us their own glory, their own love and fellowship. They have included us in their own eternal and infinite life of love and communion. This is all done so that the world may believe, so that the world may know Christ and his Father.

But, as has been already spoken of some in this Lenten series, the church is *not* one as it ought to be. We know this as well as anyone. The Church is splintered and divided, the churches have often condemned one another, doing everything they can to call down fire and brimstone on each other’s steeples. The Great Schism happened in the year 1054, when the churches of the Greek East and Latin West heaped condemnations upon one another. The Reformation in the sixteenth century, for all of the good that it brought about, needs to be understood as a schism too. And whenever we are talking about a schism in the church, the most important thing is not to cast blame. The schism is itself the greatest scandal. Think of it in terms of Jesus’ prayer. When the church is one, the world believes that Christ is sent by the Father, the world knows that the Father loves them. Jesus says this clearly. So in the situation of a schism, this witness of love is broken. The unity of the church is necessary for the church’s witness in this world. Without it, the world cannot believe. In the fact of a church schism, in the face of church division, the response is not to determine who is to blame for it. The response has to be for both parties of the schism to repent, to turn to Christ, to let the word of God dwell richly in them once again. The response has to be to turn to one another in love.

There is a clear promise in this prayer of Jesus to his Father. The promise is that when the church is one, perfectly one, then the world will believe, the world will know that the Father sent Christ because of his great love. Now it is not up to any one of us to bring about worldwide reconciliation of the churches. Last week Rev. Mark Knappe spoke about ecumenism, which is the work to unite divided churches together again in truth and love. The last hundred years or so there has been a large-scale ecumenical movement, bringing the divided churches back together to talk to one another. And, after one hundred years, there are many, many more churches now than there were when it all started. If anything, after one hundred years, the divisions are even greater. These large-scale problems of the worldwide church’s divisions are

something that the Lord is going to have to settle in some miraculous or catastrophic way. The best way for each of us to work at restoring the unity of the church, the best way to work toward becoming “perfectly one” as Christ prayed, is to join Jesus in his prayer. Pray that the church may be one. Pray that the failures of love and truth that have led to the divisions in the church’s will be repented of, and that love and truth will reign in the church. And pray too that we might love our neighbors, both our neighbors here at Calvary, and all those who confess the name of Christ. But more than this, we ought also to look forward to the day when there are no divisions in the church. When the church is all gathered together from every house and home, from under every steeple and from every cathedral. There is coming a day when all of our divisions will cease, when wars and plague and pestilence will end, and the veil and curtain that still seems to be between us and God will be shown to have been finally torn on a wooden cross and a little hill outside of Jerusalem. And so too we should pray, come quickly Lord Jesus. Amen.