

Rev. David R. Solum
7th Sunday after Easter
May 23 & 24, 2020
Immanuel Lutheran, Michigan City
John 17:1-11

Saying that you are going to pray for someone is good, but actually praying with them is much better. You should be doing this with at least your friends and families on a regular basis. Don't only pray for your children or spouse or parent silently to yourself, but also pray for them with them, so that the one praying and the one receiving prayer would be edified and that you would have unity in faith and purpose.

When you pray with someone out loud, you are telling them what all believers should expect to receive from the Father, who is good and gracious. Even if you mention things that might not come to them, over and above that, you pray that God's gracious will would be done and that He would give them what they need for body and soul and that they receive what is above all: the kingdom of heaven. This one can expect from our loving Father. Praying with a person can help all those involved to entrust their lives to God and not to the things of this world, and to find comfort that He is on their side and with them to help them.

Jesus not only has said that He will be our advocate and pray for us, but He has actually left behind this marvelous prayer in John 17, which we call the "High Priestly Prayer" because as a priest intercedes for his people, Jesus is interceding for us. Our reading today has only the first eleven verses, but you should really read all twenty-six verses. In the prayer He tells us what we should expect from our heavenly Father, namely that we have unity with Him and in Him.

This is no small thing that Christ asks on our behalf! He is asking that we sinners all receive no less than God's life, holiness, righteousness, blessedness, and His entire kingdom and that we share it together eternally. All this He asks that we receive without any works or merit or worthiness, only by faith. Only by believing the truth, the words which the Father gave the Son to preach to His disciples, who in turn preached it to others and left us a testimony in the Holy Scriptures, do we have this unity.

This seems too good to be true. How can we who are still so full of sin and live in a terribly divided world pray for unity? But every good Christian prayer asks for the impossible. We ask not for what we deserve or earn, not for what we can do for ourselves, but for what only God can do. And not only do we ask, but we expect it, because we believe the Truth, that Christ, who is our advocate, has earned it and bought it with His own precious blood.

We pray for this unity whenever we ask from God to give us a share in His life, when we ask for His name and kingdom and will to be done, for daily bread and forgiveness and deliverance from temptation and evil. We pray for it continually because we are so sorely tempted and tried by the world and devil, that if God didn't continuously hold us together, we'd fall apart.

This pandemic has brought new challenges to this unity. First, we have been physically isolated from one another. It's hard to maintain unity in the truth and be witnesses to this unity in our words and actions while in isolation.

It's also impossible to continue to have unity when you do not receive God's gifts. "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." There is a temptation for many Christians during this time of isolation to be lazy and unfaithful and not to remain in Christ's Word by listening to His preaching, whether online or in-person, and reading the Scriptures with their families. Christ says, "I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in Me and you will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing. Without my Word you are divided from Me. You are like a dead, cut off branch."

You must not also neglect Lord's Supper, which requires in-person attendance to receive, whether you receive it privately with me for a time during this pandemic or come and receive it together with the whole congregation. In the Supper we have the most intimate expression of our unity with God. Only those who have adhere to the truth may receive it. Those who cling to what divides, to sin and false teachings, may not receive it, so that the truth would be loved and guarded among us and no one would be scandalized and led astray, and so that the person who sins would repent and then receive true unity with God in the forgiveness of sins of this holy meal. In the Supper we have communion with Christ and the heavenly host, celebrating His victorious death and resurrection.

Another challenge to our unity is that some pastors are using this pandemic to teach and practice their faith in a way that contradicts the truth. Some have resorted to consecrating the Sacrament through the internet to people watching in their homes, which runs contrary to the purpose and command of Christ who called and ordained ministers give the sacrament and gave a meal that

was not to be eaten in isolation or given to oneself. Rather it is given to us, placed in our mouths by God through His ministers. The Word of God is not a simple hocus pocus incantation which magically changes anything wherever and whenever I want. Otherwise I could walk over the beach at Washington Park and shout, “You are all baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” – and everyone swimming at that time would be baptized. Rather, God’s Word is to be preached according to God’s command and promise. Additionally, this strange practice allows for anyone watching the service online, whether they adhere to the truth or not, to receive the Sacrament. This does not promote unity but division.

Others have talked about Communion as if God, during this pandemic, is forbidding us to receive this Sacrament as a punishment. They’re calling it a eucharistic fast. But while this pestilence is from God, He has never commanded His ministers to withhold the sacrament from those who believe and desire it. We live in the time of the Gospel, in which we now have opportunity to repent and receive His gifts before He returns again.

Some have preached false end-of-the-world scenarios and have made themselves prophets of the end times. They claim to have new revelation from God apart from His Word. But of these preachers God says, “Those who add or take away from this book will have the plagues mentioned in this book added to them.”

The challenge to our unity is always the temptation to put our trust in something other than God’s truth. Some associate the truth with political affiliation. For others, it is greed and worldliness as some use the pandemic as an excuse to spoil themselves with luxuries at home

instead of helping the poor and needy. Some are putting too much trust government or medicine or science, as though we could simply follow the experts and everything will go well for us. We listen to them, but do not make them into a god as if they could save us from death.

Is there any good news for us during this pandemic? Of course there is! God uses everything for the good of those who love Him. One thing we Christians have learned is how great a treasure we have in our unity with Christ, which stay-at-home orders or sickness or death cannot destroy. How great is our joy compared to the sorrows of the world! And when we are able to fully gather as a whole congregation again, around the gifts of God, how much more will we be thankful and appreciative of our unity than before we had lost this ability!

Things like pandemics can help destroy our idols, when we see that they all fail to save us, and turn our hearts to God in whom there is true healing and salvation. More people have recognized their mortality and human weakness and are in search for the hope and comfort which the Gospel gives. And now the internet and social media are more than ever full of the preaching of the Gospel. Also, as those who would divide us preach a contrary message, the pandemic forces us to strengthen our unity by diving deeper into God's word to confess the truth. Let us pray continually that this pandemic will only make us stronger in the bond of faith and love.

That is what Christ had in mind when He prayed for us, that in all trials and temptations we would hold fast to Him and never let go. And what Christ prays, we can be sure that the Father grants. For Christ who is one God with the Father and the Holy Spirit also is man, sharing our human flesh. He also shared our weaknesses, temptations, sins, and death and overcame them by

His glorious resurrection. Christ has made Himself one with humanity, so that He would share with us His righteousness, holiness, blessedness, and immortality.

This He has given us when we were baptized and drawn into the one name – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this baptism we live in and with and by the Holy Spirit, who daily flushes out whatever divides us – greed, lust, pride, envy, hate, and idolatry – and raises us to new life in Christ, sanctifying us with the same hope, peace, love, charity, and faith. He maintains this unity in preaching and teaching, absolving sins, instructing us with His doctrine that we would as a church walk together in the same faith.

The Father, through Christ, and by the Holy Spirit makes us one with Him. No pandemic or any disaster, no power of this world or of the devil can destroy that unity. We battle against them with our prayers, entrusting ourselves to Christ and His angels, who surround us and defend us.

Ours is the victory in Jesus Christ who is risen and ascended! And we wait for Christ's return in glory, when He will destroy everything that divides and join us together with the prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints of every age, to worship and celebrate the never-ending feast. That was Christ's prayer, and God will surely do it. Amen.