

**Easter 7 / May 16, 2021**

**John 17:19**

**“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”**

Our gospel is set within Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus waited for Judas who would betray Him and the soldiers who would arrest Him, He prayed. He prayed for the disciples, who were waiting with Him. He prayed for the church that He would gather through their witness. He prayed for you and me. He prayed that the Church would be made holy in the truth of God’s word and abide in Him, through faithfulness to His words. He is the word of God in the fullest sense. John begins his gospel saying that all things were made through Him. Paul in the letter to the Colossians, says all things are held together in Him. Peter confessed that He has the words of eternal life. His words open our hearts to receive Him as Saviour. The Holy Spirit opens our minds to understand His words that we may bear fruit in Him. We abide in Him as Saviour, by remaining in His word. His words are truth and life. He prays the Father to make us holy through His words and to keep us steadfast in faith through the truth of His word.

This prayer has come to be known as Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer.” In this chapter Jesus prays that the church would be one in the unity of faith and one with Him and the Father, by abiding in His word. He prays, “Father, keep them in your name that you have given me that they all may be one, just as you, Father are in me, and I in you.” Jesus wasn’t praying for the unity of the church as an administrative unit. He wasn’t praying all churches would have the same liturgy and administer their affairs in the same way. He wasn’t praying believers would celebrate Christmas and Easter on the same dates. He was praying that the church would abide in His word, return to His word, be instructed in His word and remain faithful to His word. He was especially concerned the church would share the truth of His word and make disciples of all nations. To that end He prayed, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” The unity of the church is not in having a common head office in Jerusalem. The unity of the church is based on faith in Him and on the truth of His words.

Jesus knew there would be divisions in the church because of His word. He knew teachers would arise in the church speaking their words, instead of His words. He knew they would gather followers for themselves rather than for Him, by teaching things opposed to the message of the cross; teaching a salvation by human works and denying Him as Saviour. He was praying that His word would not be drowned out by human words and opinions. He was praying that believers would test the spirits and when in error, return to His word. He was praying that those who trust in Him as Saviour would always have His word to unite them in faith. He wasn’t even suggesting that believers wouldn’t be mistaken about aspects of His word. He was praying that despite the assaults of false teachers and the presence of sin and despite misunderstandings among believers that the church would seek the truth in His word and always be faithful in proclaiming His word, so that others also would know the truth and believe in Him as Saviour.

Jesus prayed believers would be protected from sin, the world and the devil. He prayed believers would not give into the desires of the sinful nature, but He did not create the church to be a sinless gathering of saints. He created the church to express His forgiveness in a sin broken world, by living in forgiveness with one another. He created the Church to proclaim God’s forgiveness to the nations through faith in Him. The church would not bring glory to itself in its sinlessness. It would bring glory to Him, because of His word of forgiveness. The church would speak His word of repentance and forgiveness to the world.

Before He withdrew His visible presence from the church and ascended into heaven, Jesus commissioned the church to take His word to the nations. He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and on the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Jesus created the church to continue in the ministry of the word, which God began through the prophets, which He fulfilled through His teaching and preaching. Jesus commissioned the church to proclaim His word, call people to repentance and receive forgiveness through faith in His name.

Jesus created the church to embody His words and express His love for the world, both by speaking words of repentance and forgiveness and also by caring for the physical needs of human beings. On the day of judgement Jesus will say, “Whatever you did for the least of these my brothers, you did for me.” Caring for people’s bodily needs has always been an important part of caring for people’s spiritual needs. The first hospitals were operated by Christians, as an extension of Jesus’ healing ministry and as a means of sharing the word of repentance and spiritual healing through faith in Jesus’ name. The church is a gathering of self-confessed sinners, calling on other

sinners to receive the healing of forgiveness God prepared and offers all to receive through faith in Jesus' name. The church does this by being sanctified in the truth of God's word and abiding in Jesus' words.

Jesus prayed the church would remain faithful to the truth of His word, even in the face of suffering. The church suffers persecution for abiding in Jesus' words! In the first three centuries the Romans thought Christians were subversive of their empire, because they would not worship national gods, or bow down to the emperor as a divine being. Christians were hated because they wouldn't pray to the emperor. They wouldn't pray to the emperor, but they would pray for the Emperor and for the empire, in accordance with the truth of God's word. Christians continue to pray for kings, rulers and those in authority, in accordance with God's word.

In accordance with Jesus' words, Christians love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. In the early centuries of the Christian era, the church's expression of Jesus' love and faithfulness to His words, made a deep impression on the Romans and eventually changed their hearts. The thing that made the biggest impression on the ancient world was the love Christians expressed both to each other and to those who persecuted them, in accordance with the truth of God's word. The church on earth will never be free from the effects of its own sin. It will never have one head office, do things the same way, keep the same holy days, or observe the same customs. But it will always have Jesus as its head, His love as its heart and His word as truth. And so, Jesus prays "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."

Jesus desires that we be sanctified by His word and abide in its truth. Sanctify means to be made holy and to be set apart for God's special purpose. We are made holy in the forgiveness of sins, through the word of the gospel and the washing of holy baptism. We are set apart for the purpose of expressing the truth of the gospel in our kind actions towards one another. Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you that you love one another: Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The church is set apart for the purpose of proclaiming the truth of the gospel to other people; making disciples of all nations, baptizing in the divine name and teaching the whole truth of God's word.

On the fortieth day of His resurrection Jesus gathered the disciples on the Mount of Olives, outside of Jerusalem. He reaffirmed His continuing presence among them through the Holy Spirit, who would come to them in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit would lead them into the truth by leading them into the scriptures and by bringing Jesus' words to their remembrance. Empowered by the Holy Spirit they would speak His word to the nations, beginning in Jerusalem. When He was gone from their sight, an angel assured them He would return, saying "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way you saw him go into heaven." He continues to abide with us and among through His word. Although we cannot see Him with our eyes, we see Him in His word. His word is truth! Although we cannot hear His voice with our ears, we hear Him speak through His word. His words give forgiveness and eternal life! He abides among us through His word. We abide in Him through His word. He prays for us and the whole church on earth, "Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth." May Jesus' prayer be fulfilled within us and among us. In His Name Amen.