

## **Putting Our House In Order**

May 20, 2012

John 17:6-19

Today in the church year is a day of waiting, a time for reflection, a time to stop, to ponder, to listen quietly, to pray, to feel, to experience, to wait and to wonder.

In the sequence of things, this past Thursday was Ascension Day, the day Jesus rose into heaven, and next Sunday is Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit visits the disciples with power. It is the birthday of the church.

Today is a waiting day, a day to reflect upon all that Jesus had said, all that he had taught, all that he had done.

I imagine the disciples at this moment felt confused, felt alone, felt lost, were wondering what was going to happen next, were wondering if this was the end or just a beginning, as Jesus had promised. They probably felt frightened, insecure, amazed, and perplexed.

They had just seen Jesus rise into heaven, they had just seen their friend, their teacher, their Lord go away from them. This was a glorious event, for now they were certain that Jesus was with the Father, that all he taught and demonstrated was true and was indeed the Word of God.

But on the other hand, now they were alone, without their friend, without their leader, without their companion. Yes, today in the lives of the disciples was a day that was really in between times, in between the time when they had Jesus with them, and before the time when they would be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

This was an awkward time for the disciples. It was a time for them to think about the words of Jesus, to dwell on his teaching, to recall his promises for them.

And I think it is very appropriate that this text from John's gospel has been chosen for today. For if the disciples were to think about this text, if they could recall this conversation with Jesus, if they could remember these words, this in between time wouldn't seem so frightening, nor would they seem so alone.

This is the prayer that has become known as Jesus' high priestly prayer. It could really be called the Last Will and Testament of Jesus. Thus the title of this sermon. It is the prayer that Jesus prayed with his disciples before the events of Holy Week.

He prayed this to comfort the disciples who could not really understand it all then, but now following the death and resurrection of Jesus, and following his ascension, now they could really appreciate the words of this prayer, now they could understand what Jesus was saying, what he meant.

As we look at this prayer, we can see that there is much there from which the disciples could draw strength, power, and also the assurance that indeed they would be with Jesus again somehow.

Jesus' prayer was for a special people. He declared that he did not offer a universal intercession. "I pray for them," said he. "My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me, because they belong to you."

In reading this beautiful prayer through, one big question comes to mind: Who are the people that are described as "them," or as "they?" Who are these favored individuals, who are such a specific and important part of the Jesus' prayer?

The answer to that question is supplied by the words of our text. The people for whom Christ prays are an "unearthly people." They are a people somewhat above the world. "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world."

Specifically, Jesus prayed for four things. First, he prayed for Security. Let's look at verse 11 again. "Now I am departing from the world; they are staying in this world, but I am coming to you, Holy Father. You have given me your name; now protect them by the power of your name so that they will be united just as we are."

This section of the prayer is very unique because it is the only place in the Gospel of John where we find Jesus using the term "Holy Father." One Bible scholar suggests that Jesus uses this term because he wants God to watch over us like a Father would.

It is very assuring to have that image of God with all his power and might watching over each of us with the affection of a Father. We have the guarantee that God will keep the saints from the evil of the world the way a Father tries to protect his family.

Then in verse 12, where Jesus says that he kept or guarded the disciples, depending on the translation you are using, there are actually two different forms of the word "keep" used. One meaning more "I preserve" the other meaning more "I guarded."

Jesus is simply reminding the Father that while he was in the world, he guarded them as a means to their preservation. And now that he will no longer be in the world, he is asking the Father to preserve them in the Father's name."

You almost see this from a parent's perspective. You have raised your children kept them safe now they are about to go off to college leave the safety of your house and your care and you are simply asking God the Father to protect them now because you can't do it anymore.

That is what this prayer is. Lord watch over the ones you have placed in my care, because I can't.

What a heart we see here from Jesus to pray a prayer like that for us. We truly see the Savior's heart, the Savior's love for us. And so we have a prayer for Security.

Next, we have a prayer for deliverance. In verse 14, we read, "I have given them your word," Jesus said. "And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one."

Twice in this section Jesus reminds the Father, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." And we need to be reminded of what that term, "the world," actually means.

Throughout scripture, and particularly in the teachings of Jesus and the writings of Paul, terms such as "the world" or "the flesh" are used to refer to Satan's agenda, to those things in our lives which are contrary to the ways and the Word of God.

Jesus prayer here is one of deliverance to God saying, "God, keep them from the evil one. Jesus is asking God to protect us from Satan, who is the prince of this world.

We know as parents one of the fears we deal with is what kinds of temptations we have been protecting our kids from will they fall into. We try and watch what they see, and know about. We don't want our kids to be exposed to the sickness that is lurking out there in the world.

But we know once they have left our side they will be exposed to all the trappings the world has to offer. So Jesus simply asks the Heavenly Father to protect them from the forces of evil. Jesus asks the Father to help them because, "They are not part of the world any more than I am."

So we have seen a prayer for Security and a Prayer for Deliverance.

And now we have a prayer for sanctification. "Make them holy by your truth, teach them your word, which is truth," Jesus continues in verse 17. "Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth."

An old deacon used to pray every Wednesday night at prayer meeting for his wrongdoing and concluded his prayer the same way: "And, Lord, clean all the cobwebs out of my life - the things that are gathered there that ought not to have been there. O Lord, clean all the cobwebs out of my life."

It got too much for one fellow in the prayer meeting after hearing the deacon once too often; so when the old deacon said the same prayer the next time, the fellow jumped to his feet and shouted: "Lord, Lord, don't clean the cobwebs. Kill the spider, kill the spider.

Let's think about this thing we call sanctification for a minute. You know, some of our Christian brethren place a lot of emphasis on a "conversion experience" - a one-time act and decision.

And I am certainly not here to criticize or start an argument with anyone. But sanctification is a lifetime process and determination. It is an on-going, continuous way of living, not a single moment.

Sanctification is not about living a clean or perfect life, but an obedient life. The attraction of the world, the weakness of the flesh, and the onslaught of evil are daily battles. Sanctification involves a purifying of our whole life to the service of God.

Sanctification is not about avoiding or escaping the world but yielding and surrendering to God. Again, this word "world" is very prominent in Jesus' prayer; it occurs an astonishing 20 times in John 17.

Our weapons against the beliefs, values, and attitudes of the world that are contrary to the nature and will of God are prayer to God, and obedience to the word of God, and the power of His name. We see all of these clearly in today's reading.

A Prayer for Security, a Prayer for Deliverance, a Prayer for Sanctification.

And finally we come to a prayer for Unity. Beginning in verse 20, Jesus prays, "I am praying not only for these disciples, but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will be one, just as you and I are one - as you are in me, Father, and I am in you.....May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me."

There was a story of some rescuers who found a man alone on a deserted island. But his rescuers were confused by something they saw. They saw three huts. So they asked the man about the three huts. He explained, "One was for me to live in. And I'm a religious man, so I built a church.

The rescuers, who were still confused why there should be a third hut, then asked, "Well, what about the third hut? Who lives there? The man replied, "Oh, nobody in particular. There was a church spilt.

Thomas Jefferson said, "An association of men who will not quarrel with one another is a thing which has never existed."

William Wallace, the leading character in the Academy-award winning movie "Braveheart" chastised his fellow Scots for allowing minor issues, internal strife, and power struggles to stand in the way of their fight for independence from the English: "We have beaten the English but they're back because you won't stand together."

The word "one" is another key word in John 17. It appears in verses 11, twice in 21 and 22, and 23.

The unity of God's church should reflect the unity of the Father and the Son. Verse 23 reveals to us the nature of this unity. The Son is obedient to the Father and the Father loves the Son.

As a church, we are many members, but one body. Paul speaks clearly about this in letters to churches at Rome and Colossae.

Now, we need to keep in mind that to be one is not the absence of opinions, but the absence of divisions. The church's greatest damage is the open sore that festers and swells and spreads after a disagreement or a misunderstanding. Disunity weakens, scatters, and muffles the church.

A pastor told me how much hurt his church had to overcome when two prominent members of the church left over whether to relocate the church. No bandage or tape or glue can piece together a divided church.

Some churches are split into two, some members form little cliques, and many members withdraw into their shell. People from both sides of an argument or an issue claim that they are in the right, that God is on their side, and that the other group started it first.

It's been said that the many churches were planted not by design but by default through church divisions, church splits and church fights.

As a good friend of mine in a church I served in Hickory once put it, "There's nothing worse than a bunch of stirred up Christians."

But on the other side of that coin we have the words of Bill Hybles who said there is nothing on earth like the local church when it is working right. It has the power to transform and changes lives.

I pray that this church will not be divided but united to grow the church into what God would have it be.

"One day a small boy was trying to lift a heavy stone, but he couldn't budge it. His father passing by stopped to watch his efforts. Finally the father asked his son, "Are you using all your strength?"

"Yes, I am," the boy yelled, "I am using every lost bit of energy and strength I have. As the boy talked he sounded exasperated and worn out." The father turned to the boy and said, "No, you are not using all of your strength, you haven't asked me to help you.

So the boy asked the father to help, but still that stone couldn't be moved. So, the father asked his older sort to help, but still they couldn't move it. Then a neighbor was asked to help, then another neighbor, and another, and finally with each one giving all their energy and strength to the project, the stone was moved!

After everyone had left, the father turned to his son and said, "You see, when we all work together, when we use our strength together, then we can accomplish some things that any of us by ourselves could not accomplish. Unity, togetherness, working together can add greater strength to any project."

I would ask that as you consider this prayer of Jesus today and whenever you read it, remember Jesus prayed for his disciples, yes, but he was also praying for you and me. Jesus wants us to live as children of God and promises to give us the strength to face whatever comes.

Remember to pray for those around you, and those far away. Pray that we will be protected in our faith and that we will "sanctified" even if that means that we will need the courage to appear weird to others.

Remember that we are to be salt and light to a bland and dark world. Remember that Jesus is praying for us and that all the power of God is with us. And remember that nothing has power over the power of God.