

UNIVERSITY UMC OF REDLANDS, CA
“BE SANCTIFIED IN TRUTH”

John 17:6-19¹

Seventh Sunday in Lent/Mother’s Day – May 10th, 2024

⁶ “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you, ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me.

⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them.

¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.

¹³ But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

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Introduction.

Happy Mother's Day! ... to all of us, yes, because mothers have been the vehicle through which God has given us life, and especially to all those sisters who have the privilege of being mothers, may God fill them with wisdom to fulfill that responsibility, and to those who do not, or not yet, we wish that maternal spirit prosper in the well-being of our community and our church.

For me, this day has taken a very special turn since my mother died more than 15 years ago, and that turn has fallen on my beloved wife, because her company, advice, maternal care, and other details have filled the place that my mother had.

And for this morning's reflection, I want to see the maternal side of God in the prayer that Jesus Christ made for his people. A prayer that unites us with the heart of every mother praying to God for her children.

Every year on this seventh Sunday of Easter, which is the last Sunday of Easter before Pentecost, our gospel reading is taken from this very famous prayer in John 17.

It is a beautiful, inspiring prayer offered by Jesus for his disciples, and for all "those who will believe in [him] through their word" (John 17:20). Which, of course, is us.

Amazing, isn't it? That Jesus prays for us?

Just stop and think about that for a moment. It is such a gift and blessing to be prayed for. I personally appreciate everyone who prays for me, and I consider it a privilege and calling to remember you in my prayers, too.

Prayer is a remarkable gift, because it opens us up to God's promises, and invites God to help us, and those for whom we are praying. Every prayer is heard by God, which means that every time we pray, or are prayed for, something quite wonderful happens. I believe that.

But today, we are reminded that Jesus actually prays for us. What better gift is there? And not only that, but we get to actually listen in on this prayer.

John heard this prayer and faithful recorded it, so we actually know what Jesus was praying for.

It is a long and beautiful prayer, but it can be a little confusing. So I want to break down into a few key pieces this morning, and help us to better understand exactly what Jesus is praying for, when he prays for us.

Why Jesus prays.

Let's remember why Jesus is praying at this particular point in his ministry. This prayer occurs right before Jesus is arrested. Jesus knows what is to come. We hear him say in this prayer: "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you."

So, Jesus knows that he is going to the Father, but his followers are not. He will no longer be with them in the same way, which leads to this prayer. "While I was with them," he prays, "I protected them in your name that you have given me ... But now I am coming to you."

This makes me think of dropping off my children at school for the first time. Lots of prayers, of course. Entrusting them to God, knowing that we will not be with them. Praying that God will protect them. We've taught them, prepared them, as best we could. But now, it is time for them to be on their own.

To me, this is what Jesus is doing here, as he gets ready to go to the cross and ultimately to return to heaven. It is time for his disciples to do this without Jesus right there with them. At least physically.

Protect them.

While Jesus was with his disciples, he could protect them. But now, things are changing. And so he prays: "Holy Father, protect them in

your name that you have given me, so that they may be one.” And the reason he is praying for their protection is important: it is “so that they may be one.”

A little later in this same prayer, he prays specifically that we would be protected from the evil one. Protected, so that they may be one. The truth is that the evil one wants nothing more than for us not to be one. Because he knows that a house that is divided cannot stand. I have often said that the devil doesn't care what churches argue about, just as long as we are arguing.

In the first congregation that I served as a pastor, our council argued for quite some time about purchase a set of pews. The devil, I am sure, was delighted. Because if we are arguing about something – anything! – then we are not able to give ourselves fully to the task of being the church in the world. And we are not one, which Jesus wants for us. So he prays, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one.”

Sanctify them in the Truth

But then Jesus goes on in this prayer to ask for something else for us, that is also very important. “Sanctify them in the truth,” he prays. There are two key words in this part of the prayer: sanctify, and truth.

First, sanctify. Which literally means to be set apart. Jesus is praying that we would be set apart. We do not belong to the world, he says in this prayer, just as he does not belong to this world. We do not belong to the world, but we are sent into the world, he also says. So, we are set apart from the world in order to be sent into the world.

Even without a pandemic, there are many trials and tribulations in this world. As it has been famously said, we ought to be kinder than necessary, for everyone is fighting some sort of battle. And in my experience, that is exactly right.

The world is full of battles. But we are not of this world anymore. We follow Jesus. We know that our God loves us and all this world, and that makes all the difference. We have made our way onto the lifeboat, or more accurately, Jesus has lifted us onto his lifeboat. Now, we are in a unique position to help others.

“Set them apart in the truth,” Jesus prays. That we would be set apart, lifted onto his lifeboat. But also, that we would be set apart “in the truth.” But what is the truth? It is said that we live in a “post-truth world.” If you look it up, what that means is in our world there has been a “disappearance of shared objective standards for truth.” We all have our own truth in today’s world. We no longer share an objective standard truth. The slogan of our time is “live your truth.”

But I don’t believe that Jesus would agree with this. In fact, what he says in this prayer is what I believe he would still say to us today, he would still pray for us today: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” God’s Word is the truth. It is our shared objective standard for truth.

We might quibble about how to interpret parts of God’s Word, but there should be no argument about its basic point: that God created us, and loves us; but without Jesus, we are all drowning.

We are treading water in the ocean that is this world, and it is pulling us under. And everything that this world might offer for help is also sinking. There is only one lifeboat, there is only one savior.

The words of this prayer immediately after “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” are these: “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

We have been sent into the world, in the same way that Jesus was sent into the world. Not to save the world, of course. But to introduce the savior to the world. To remind the world of God’s undying love for all this world.

This is the truth that anchors us in the storms of life, and that fills us with hope and faith. It is the truth that makes our joy complete, in the beautiful words of this prayer. It is the truth, our shared, objective truth, that has a name, and his name is Jesus.

Conclusion

This prayer that Jesus made brings us closer to the heart of God, and which echoes the fervent prayers that our mothers make for each of us, invites us to continue in our responsibility to pray for our family, day and night.

Jesus, our way, our truth, and our life.

Who loves us, who died for us, and who prays for us.

Praying that we would be protected from evil.

Praying that we would be one.

And praying that we would be so secure in his truth, that we would be able to rescue those around us, who are struggling to find a truth on which to rest, and to build a life of meaning and hope.

Jesus is that truth. And He asks that we share it with the world.

Let us do so faithfully, to the glory of God. Amen