

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Easter 7

May 13, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran

A prayer for God's children

—John 17:11b-19.

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one.

¹² *While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.*

¹³ *“I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.*

¹⁶ *They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.*

“I’m praying for you.” It’s nice to hear those words. It’s nice to know that people are praying for us. If you’re about to go into surgery, a fellow Christian says, “I’m praying for you.” And they actually do. You’re about to head out on a long trip, maybe to higher ground for the summer, and your friends say, “I pray you have a safe trip.” A brother or sister knows you’re struggling with something in particular and says, “I’m praying for you.” It’s nice to know that people are praying for you. Of all the people that have prayed for you, there’s probably one human being in your life that has prayed for you the most. And who might that be? Chances are it is or was your mother. We’ll have a prayer later for mothers on Mother’s Day. But if God has blessed you with a Christian mother, I bet she has prayed for you more than any other human being.

What sorts of prayers do mothers pray on behalf of their children? I’m sure the prayers change and multiply as the child grows. When the child is a baby, the prayer is probably, “Lord help him grow,” or “Lord, keep her safe.” When mom drops her son off for the first day of preschool or kindergarten, maybe she prays, “Lord, keep him out of trouble,” or “Protect her from any harm.” As they grow, moms might pray for their children to be successful in school, or athletics. As her children get ready to leave home, maybe the mother’s prayers become more earnest. “Lord, keep my children safe. Keep them humble. Keep them in you. Protect them from all danger to body and soul.” As long as Christian moms keep on breathing, I’m certain that they keep on praying for their children.

And yet, there’s one who prays for all of God’s children even more earnestly than a mother. In our lesson from John 17, Jesus prays for his disciple on the night he was betrayed. It was time to say good-bye, in a way. Earlier in the evening, Jesus had told his disciples, **“My children, I will be with you only a little longer.”** Jesus had been with his disciples walking this earth for 3 years. That night, he gathered with these disciples to share with them one last Passover. He shared with them, his own true body and blood as he instituted the Lord’s Supper. He taught them as he had before. He promised them mansions in heaven one day. He promised them his Holy Spirit who would counsel and comfort after he returned to the Father. And finally, he prayed... for them. We can sum up that prayer in three verbs: Keep, protect, and sanctify. Keep them. Protect them. Sanctify them.

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. Or more literally, “Holy Father, keep them in your name.” “Lord, keep them.” That was Jesus’ desire for his disciples then, and that’s his desire for you now—that God keep you in his name and by his name. But let that one verb really sink in. What does it mean for God to keep you? It’s not like the sense where I keep a bunch of stuff, even though I don’t really need it. Like the junk drawer. Or like my garage cabinets. I open the door and all this stuff falls out and I think, “Why do I bother keeping all this stuff?” On the other hand, it’s not like God keeps us because he needs us and relies on us. No. Jesus prayed that God keep his disciples just hours before they abandoned him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed that God keep them in his name just hours before Peter denied that very name that saves. Can you imagine if God’s keeping us depended on our keeping him and his commands? If God were to keep me only as much as I have kept his commands... If God were to keep me only as close as I have kept him... In fact the more that I think of it, why would God keep me? Why would God keep you?

Simply because he wants too. It is purely by God’s great, undeserved love for us that he desires to keep us. God keeping us is like God holding us close to himself. It’s like you want to keep and hold onto something that was lost and then you got it back again at a great cost. It’s like a mother holding a child to her chest to comfort or protect. David said it’s like God keeping or guarding you as one guards the apple of his eye. It’s like God holding you in the palm of his hand with a grasp far tighter than your own. As Jesus prayed this prayer, “Father, keep them,” he was about to give God all the reason that he needed to keep us as his own. He was about to die in our place, for our sin, himself forsaken by God for a time, so God could keep us for eternity. “Father, keep them.”

Jesus also prays, “Protect them.” Why did they need protection, and why do we? In Jesus words, **“I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.”** If you haven’t realized it already, you have one thing that binds you to the love of God and at the same time inflicts you with the hate of the world—it’s the words and promises of God. Because you belong to God and God keeps you as his own the world hates you. I don’t know about you, but for me that’s really hard sometimes because I don’t like to be hated. I’d rather

people like me. On the other hand, I also want to please God. But I can't do both. You can't do both. Either you please the unbelieving world and in doing so, you are hating God; or you hate the world and please God. But you can't do both; not at the same time. A serious danger we face is to please and appease the world to avoid being hated by the world. But do we really want to escape the hate of world only to fall back under God's wrath? We need protection from this terrible evil. "Lord, protect them." Jesus prays. ***My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.***

If the world hates us because we believe in Jesus and his word, wouldn't it be better if God just took us out of the world? Well, yeah, that would be better by far! Being in heaven with Jesus would be a lot better than being in a perilous world that hates us. It's a no brainer. Being taken out of the world to be with Jesus would be better by far... for us but not for the world. Just think. If Jesus had taken his disciples with him to heaven right away, would the gospel of Jesus Christ have reached an Ethiopian on his way home from Jerusalem? Would it have reached and saved a Jailer driven to despair and his family in the city of Philippi? Would it have reached across seas and across centuries to me today? Jesus didn't pray that his disciple be taken out of the world immediately because he had a special purpose for them.

For whatever good and gracious purpose, God leaves us in this world for just as long as he has determined. Perhaps it is for our own good and strengthening, or maybe for the good of someone else. And so Jesus prays, "***Protect them from the evil one.***" Protect them from the evil one, that is the devil, as he is at work in this world. Protect them, Lord, from the evil desires that come from within. "Father, keep them and protect them," Jesus prays for God's children.

And how does God keep and protect his children? Jesus answers that in the final part of this prayer, "***Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.***" God's will is not typically that a person be physically snatched out of the world immediately after they are brought to faith. But when the Holy Spirit brought you to faith, he did set you apart from the sinful world as a holy child of God. That's what the verb "sanctify" literally means: to set apart as holy. Through baptism, water and the Word, God set you apart by washing away all your sins and making you his child. When he sanctified you he severed you from your sin and its penalty he binds you to Jesus Christ and his forgiveness. The Holy Spirit has sanctified and kept you in the one true faith and he has done this by the truth of the gospel.

Ironically, the word of truth that causes the world to hate us is also the very Word that is our strength and shield, our food and our drink. The word of truth is more than just a textbook to us. It's God's written promise to us that he is ours and we are his. That word of truth is Jesus himself and his forgiveness spoken at your baptism, written in the Bible, and proclaimed to you in the Lord's Supper. By that truth you are sanctified. You are set apart as God's child. And by that word of truth, The Holy Spirit continues to sanctify you. He arms you with the weapon of truth to fight against the evil one. He gives you new and holy desires that seek to please God and not the world. He works in you fruits of faith that set you apart from the world.

"I'm praying for you." It's nice to hear those words. It's nice to have people praying for us... But can you imagine, kicking back at the table with Jesus and having him pray these things just for you! The disciples that night had a pretty awesome privilege to have Jesus praying for them. After that things would change... not in a bad way. But Jesus died, he rose, and forty days later he ascended into heaven. He was taken out of this world and up into heaven in glorious way. And what's he doing up there? He's praying for you. Our ascended Lord intercedes before God the Father on our behalf. He's praying for you. He's talking to God on your behalf for you. Jesus is praying for you, and not like we pray for people on the other side of the world that we don't even know. He prays for you by name. He knows you personally as your Savior and you brother. I don't know what exactly he saying and praying, but I know he is interceding before God for you. He's praying for you. But I do know what he prayed that night in the upper room — "Keep them. Protect them. Sanctify them."

And so we pray: Sanctify us by the truth, your word is truth. Amen.