

Sanctify us by Your Truth

John 17:11-19

Finding one of her students making faces at the other children on the playground, Mrs. Smith stopped to gently correct the child. Smiling sweetly, the teacher said, *“Bobby, when I was a child, I was told that if I made ugly faces, it would freeze and I would stay like that.”* Bobby looked up at her and replied, *“Well, Mrs. Smith, you can’t say you weren’t warned.”*

Ouch! They say that the truth hurts. That’s why we often try to avoid it at all costs. And yet, it’s important not only to tell the truth, but to hear to the truth. Certainly our loving Heavenly Father understands that full well. That’s why He doesn’t mince words with us, but always tells us the whole truth, both the Good News and the bad news, the Law and the Gospel. And the reason He shares the truth with us is for our complete cleansing and salvation, for our redemption and sanctification.

We see that beautifully demonstrated in our Gospel lesson for today – Jesus’ prayer for His disciples. This is a part of His High Priestly prayer, spoken at the Last Supper on the night when He was betrayed. Even though He was about to suffer terrible agony and die a humiliating, damning death on the cross to save the world, His thought was not for Himself, but only for His disciples. That’s why He prayed, not for His own needs, but for them. He prayed that they might be one, just as He and the Father are one. He prayed that they might be filled with joy, and He prayed that they might be protected from the evil one. But above all, He prayed: **“FATHER, SANCTIFY THEM IN THE TRUTH; YOUR WORD IS TRUTH.”**

Dear friends, that’s the same prayer that Jesus prays for you and me, as He intercedes on our behalf at God’s right hand. He prays that you and I might be one, not only one with God the Father, but one with each other. Of course, the fact of the matter is we are already one. Whether we like it or not, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, by the blood He shed on the cross. That saving blood is like the glue that cements us together as the one body of Christ. But Jesus’ prayer is that we would remain in that one body and live out our oneness, by being kind and gentle, patient and forgiving with one another, just like He is with us.

He also prays that we would have true joy in this life – joy that comes, not from outward circumstances and material possessions, but the joy of our salvation – the joy of knowing that we are forgiven and free in Jesus Christ. And He prays that God would protect us from the evil one. It's the Greek word for a squadron of soldiers that guards the garrison, so that no enemy can infiltrate and destroy it. Well, that's exactly what God the Father does for you and me. He guards and protects us against Satan's attacks, breaking and hindering every evil plan of the devil, the world and our sinful flesh, so that he cannot infiltrate our heart and soul and destroy our faith. But the main way God does that is by means of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies us in the truth, just like our text says.

That's why our text is the Gospel lesson for the last Sunday of the Easter Season – in preparation for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday. The work of the Holy Spirit is sanctification, because the word *sanctify* means: 'to make holy,' and that's just what the Holy Spirit does. He sanctifies us in the broad sense, by planting the seed of saving faith in our heart and bringing us into the Holy Christian Church. And He sanctifies us in the narrow sense, by daily and richly forgiving our sins, keeping us strong in the faith all our days, and equipping us to serve Him with godly lives. That's how He sanctifies us in the truth.

It reminds me a little bit of the story of Calin Florea, a farmer from Scarisoara, Romania. Back in 1955 he dismantled his German-made tractor, packed it in cardboard, coated it with tar, and buried it in the ground. He did this to escape the confiscating claws of communist collectivization. But in 1990 land reforms had made it possible for Florea to again farm the land that he had once owned. So he dug up the tractor, reassembled it, and started all over. Yet, had Florea not preserved his possession carefully, the elements would have destroyed it long before he came to redeem it.

My friends, in the same way the Holy Spirit is constantly working to preserve our faith in Jesus, so that it is not destroyed before He comes to redeem us. And the only way to preserve our faith is by the sanctifying power of God's Word. Unfortunately, too often you and I leave it buried on the shelf. We let sports or recreation, work or television come between us and our time in Holy Scripture. We don't

attend Bible class as eager as we should; we don't read and study our Bibles as often as we should. And even when we do, we certainly don't always put it into practice – which might explain why we're not always one in spirit, why we don't always exemplify the joy of our salvation, why we frequently succumb to the attacks of Satan.

If left unchecked, those things can lead to our destruction. And the word 'destruction' in our text actually means: 'to be lost.' It's used to describe a log that breaks into pieces and floats down river, never to be seen again. In fact, in the Book of Revelation the word 'destruction' is used as a name for the devil. He is the Destroyer, who wants to break us into pieces and flush our faith and our salvation down the tubes.

Thankfully, though, God is not about to let that happen. That's why He sent Jesus to destroy the Great Destroyer, to sink his ship and crush his power and remove him for good. Amazingly enough, the way that Jesus did that was by sanctifying or consecrating Himself. As He said in our text: "FOR THEIR SAKE I CONSECRATE MYSELF, THAT THEY ALSO MAY BE SANCTIFIED IN TRUTH." But what does that mean, that Jesus 'consecrated' or 'sanctified' Himself? The idea is found nowhere else in Scripture. And yet, we get a clue from the Septuagint, where that same verb refers to the consecration of the priests and the sacrificial animals.

All of this is described in Exodus 28:36-38, where it says: "MAKE A PLATE OF PURE GOLD AND ENGRAVE ON IT AS ON A SEAL: HOLY TO THE LORD. FASTEN A BLUE CORD TO IT TO ATTACH IT TO THE TURBAN; IT IS TO BE ON THE FRONT OF THE TURBAN. IT WILL BE ON AARON'S FOREHEAD, AND HE WILL BEAR THE GUILT INVOLVED IN THE SACRED GIFTS THE ISRAELITES CONSECRATE, WHATEVER THEIR GIFTS MAY BE. IT WILL BE ON AARON'S FOREHEAD CONTINUALLY SO THAT THEY WILL BE ACCEPTABLE TO THE LORD."

My friends, that is a foreshadowing of what Jesus did at the cross. That's where He sanctified or consecrated Himself to be our Savior, to be our High Priest, who mediated our peace with God, as well as the sacrificial victim, who shed His blood to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Just as Aaron bore the guilt of the Israelites, so Jesus bore the guilt of all our sins in His body on the tree, so that He might pay for them and wipe them out forever. No matter what you've ever

thought or said or done, no matter what terrible things torment your conscience, Jesus has washed them all away. He's done away with them once and for all, so that you can be acceptable, pure and forgiven in God's sight, Holy to the Lord.

That's what it means to be sanctified by the truth. You see, in Hebrew the word 'sanctify' means: 'to separate or set apart.' And that's just what Jesus has done by His sanctifying, cleansing blood. He has separated our sins from us, as far as the east is from the west, so that they cannot torment us anymore. And that's what the Holy Spirit continues to work in us daily, as He sanctifies us with the means of grace. He sets us apart as God's chosen people, His treasured possession, His precious inheritance. It's like we have a gold plate fastened on our forehead, the plate of Christ's righteousness, the seal of our Baptism, which marks us as Holy to the Lord.

In a sense, we might think of it like an establishment that has changed hands and is under new management and has been totally revamped. Well, by virtue of our Baptism you and I are under new ownership – the ownership of Jesus Christ our Savior. He has not only revamped us, He has totally transformed us by the remission of all our sins. And He is daily transforming us by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit through the Word and the Sacraments. He is transforming us from the inside out, so that we think and act differently; so that we're not only one in our love for each other, but unified in our purpose and calling; so that we demonstrate the joy of our salvation to the world, and they'll want what we have; so that we resist the attacks of Satan and thus are able to give a bold witness to others.

Recently I read about a 21-year-old woman named Maggie Catherwood. Back in March of 2007, she received a liver from a donor who died in an accident. The incredible thing is that she decided to share that precious gift. Maggie let doctors slice away part of the donated liver she was receiving, in order to save 8-month-old Allison Brown. The baby's mother said: *"The fact that someone else was willing to give up part of that liver they need is amazing to me!"*

What a lovely example of self-sacrifice. Maggie freely received, and so she was willing to freely give. In an even better way, Jesus freely gave His life for us, so that we can receive forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. And He continues to sanctify us in that saving truth by His

precious Word and Sacraments. May that encourage us to immerse ourselves in His means of grace, so that we are empowered to freely share His love with others in sacrificial service. And may our daily prayer be the same as that of Jesus: “FATHER, SANTIFY US IN THE TRUTH, FOR YOUR WORD IS TRUTH.” Amen.