

“Sanctify Them by the Truth”

In the name of him through whom the Father gives us his name, his Word, and eternal life, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel, we hear the Lord Jesus as he prays for his disciples – the disciples he will soon be leaving. And this really gives us a glimpse into his heart of love and compassion. You see, this is still part of the discourse that Jesus had with his disciples in the upper room where they celebrated their last Passover meal together. In only a few hours Jesus will be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the small hours of the morning he will be tried and condemned by the Jewish authorities. At sunrise he'll be standing before Pilate. And by nine AM, already having been beaten, mocked and roughed up by the guards, and then flagellated until the flesh on his back hangs in ragged, bloody strips, he'll be nailed to the cross. He knows very well all the horrors and torments he will soon have to endure. And yet, still gathered with his disciples before it all begins, his chief concern is for them. He knows that when he is taken, they are going to be lost and confused – they won't understand what's happening or why – and that in that time of desperation they may become easy prey for the enemy. And thus it is that he entrusts them to his Father's care and keeping for this period in which he will be taken away from them. “Holy Father, keep them in your name ... that they may be one even as we are one.” With the same intensity and cohesion with which God the Father and God the Son are united, Jesus asks that his disciples too may be kept together in his Father's care.

And while this is true, in a broader sense Jesus is praying for his whole church. As he prays for his immediate disciples, he also has in mind those who will come to faith in him based on their testimony after his resurrection and ascension into heaven – and all the generations of the faithful that follow. He's looking forward to the time in which we are now, the time in which we are deprived of his visible presence and in which we too often find ourselves lost and confused, not understanding what's going on in our lives or why. Knowing that we too will be vulnerable, Jesus prays to his Father that we may be kept as one and defended from the power of the devil.

That's necessary, as you know, because the enemy never rests. He's constantly coming up with new ways to deceive us. He wants to shake our trust and confidence, and lead us away from the salvation we have in Christ Jesus. And his brazen guile knows no limits: even to the point of taking this very prayer of Jesus that brings us comfort and assurance when properly understood, and twisting and distorting its intended meaning so that many people are tricked into believing that it says almost exactly the opposite of what Jesus meant when he prayed.

Specifically, the deception happens when the single sentence where Jesus prays that his disciples may be *one* is lifted out of context. Then the attempt to deceive usually comes in the form of an accusation: “See? Jesus wanted all of his followers to be united. But just look at the sad state of the Christian Church today! Why there are so many divisions and factions, all constantly warring against each other and refusing to get along. And what is it that divides them? Silly disputes over doctrine! Can you imagine? The earnest prayer and desire of the Lord Jesus is being trampled down and spat upon by unloving, pharisaical, dogmatists who insist that being “right” about some insignificant biblical jot or tittle is more important than being united as the Savior wanted us to be. Oh, why can't we do what the Lord wants and just set

aside all these arguments that keep us apart? Why don't we just love each other and try to get along as one?"

And you've got to admit that an appeal like that makes certain amount of sense. It really is an offense to the Gospel that visible Christendom is fractured into so many conflicting segments and that new cracks and schisms are developing all the time. It's precisely because the argument makes sense that so many well-meaning people are sucked into the swirling vortex of the deception and washed down the drain with it. They come to the conclusion that for the sake of outward unity and harmony, we have to be willing to compromise our confession of faith. But when we do, we are playing right into the deceiver's trap. Yes, it's sad that the Christian Church is divided; but these divisions don't arise because faithful Christians are trying to take a firm stand on the truth of God's Word. No, what disrupts the unity of the church are all of Satan's attempts to get Christians to surrender the truth of God's Word – be it by his lies, distortions, misrepresentations, and this most insidious idea that somehow we will fulfill Christ's prayer by throwing out his truths that we can't agree on so that we can all sit in a circle holding hands singing theologically vacuous songs about how united we are and how much we love each other.

And part of what's driving this deception is the absurd idea that it's our job to answer Christ's prayer. Listen: Jesus prayed *to his divine Father*. *He's* the one who answers prayer. We'd be awfully foolish to try to take that responsibility on ourselves. We'd be foolish too to think that the Father is not answering this prayer of his beloved Son. The fact is that *he is* unifying the Christian Church. There is only one holy Christian Church on earth – that's what we say we believe in the creed. It consists of everyone who by the power of God's Holy Spirit trusts in the merits of Christ for their salvation. And this church *is* united in the Savior Jesus Christ – but its unity is an article of faith. We don't see it any more than we see the physical body of Jesus in the bread at Holy Communion – but we believe that it's there even though we cannot see it. In the same way, outwardly, the Christian Church is fragmented and at odds with itself. That does not change the fact that all true believers in Jesus Christ are one with him; and as a result, they are also one with the entire communion of saints on earth and in glory. God our Father *does* unify his Church.

And in this prayer of our Lord, we hear exactly *how* he does it. Jesus prayed to his Father, "Sanctify them by the *truth*. *Your word is truth*." ... That word "sanctify" is the key; but I wonder how many of us really know what it means. It's one of those religious sounding words that gets thrown around a lot at church, very often without anyone truly understanding it. At its most basic meaning, the word *sanctify* means "set apart", or "separate out", or "set aside for a particular purpose or for a certain person's exclusive use". So when Jesus prays, "Sanctify them by the truth. Your word is truth", he's asking his Father to continue separating his disciples from the world by the true Word of God. You see, the world has its way of thinking. It's a wrong way of thinking. It's totally deceived by Satan. Those who believe in the Christian Gospel have a different way of thinking. They are born of God, and by his Spirit they think like he does. And because they are born of God they are not of the world anymore, so they don't think like the world does. Instead, they believe the truth – that's what separates or *sanctifies* them from the rest of the world.

So then in a practical sense, what sanctifies or separates the followers of Jesus is their belief in the words Jesus has given them. This belief is expressed in the true confession of faith in God's Word that stands against the false ideas of the world. And from the very beginning, the church has always expressed its confession of faith in the form of creedal statements – a creed being the content of what is believed. So, for example, the earliest confession of the Christian

church was “Jesus Christ is Lord.” That confession separated the first Christians from the Jews at the local synagogues. Understand that these first Christians shared a good deal with the rest of the folks at their synagogues. They had the same Scriptures, they were all expecting the coming Messiah, they all looked forward to the redemption of Israel ... but the Christians said, “Jesus of Nazareth is the long expected Messiah. He is the fulfillment of what we’ve been hoping for.” Those who believed that were sanctified by the truth. They were set apart. They were made one in Christ. Those who rejected that truth remained in the world’s dark deception.

And like I said earlier, Satan doesn’t stop challenging and distorting the truth. He’s always looking for a new angle of attack against the Church. So in later centuries the argument changed. “Okay, the Church confesses Jesus is Lord – but who is this Jesus? *What* is this Jesus? Is he some kind of lesser God, subordinate and inferior to the Father? Is he an exalted man? Is he something in between?” Drawing from God’s revealed Word, the Church answered, “The Scriptures declare that Jesus is true God begotten of the Father from eternity and fully equal to the Father, and he is also true man born of the Virgin Mary.” Those who denied part or all of that confession (and there were a lot of them) stayed in the world; those who believed God’s Word were sanctified and set apart by the truth. At the time of the Reformation, the question was, “*How* is a person saved by Jesus Christ?” Those who were deceived by worldly ideas said, “Salvation is by obedience to the law” or “by faith and good works”. The faithful Church looked at God’s truth and answered, “Man is saved by grace alone through faith alone, without any works done by man.” This truth set them apart. Also at the time of the Reformation, there were those who wanted to impose worldly ideas on the Sacraments. They declared, contrary to Scripture, that Baptism is merely a symbolic ceremony; not at all a washing of regeneration that saves. They also declared that the Lord Jesus could not possibly give us his body and blood in Holy Communion. And again, against those who wanted to delete or change the clear Words of Jesus, the faithful said, “No. We believe what Jesus said.” And the truth set them apart. It continues to sanctify them today.

My point is that our Father in heaven answers this prayer of Jesus his Son not by having his followers throw out the truth of his Word for the sake of an artificial outward unity, but rather by using theological controversy to drive the faithful more deeply into the Word of truth that sets them apart from the world. And the deeper they are into the truth that sanctifies them, the more united they will be.

Now, I won’t deny that sometimes, due to our sinful pride or stubbornness, theological discussions are taken to ridiculous extremes. Some bitterly fought arguments I’ve observed remind me of the two nations in the story of Gulliver’s travels who were at war over the issue of which end of soft-boiled egg should be opened. Who cares? It’s wrong to let silly differences of opinion divide us. But where God has spoken, where we have his true Word to guide us, we are not at liberty to set it aside for the sake of “unity”. God’s Truth is what sanctifies us and makes us one. Any unity based on pooled ignorance, apathy, or lack of concern for the truth is the false unity of the world. It might look good on the outside; but inside, it’s hollow. There’s no spiritual substance to it.

No, the way the Father separates people from this world doomed to destruction and gives them salvation and eternal life in Jesus Christ is through his truth. By the truth he gives us his Spirit. By the truth he gives us the faith to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, that we’re saved by trusting in what he did on the cross to redeem us, and how that Jesus comes into our lives to unite us to himself in his holy Word and the Sacraments. So, if we’re truly interested in promoting Christian unity and love, we should be all the more diligent in pursuing the knowledge

of God's truth revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. That is to say, our love of the truth will produce in our lives the Christian love that comes from being in the truth.

And let me close by making that as clear as I can. Love, real Christian love, is something we should strive for; but it's not something that we have in ourselves naturally. You can't be loving by trying to be loving any more than you can stop sinning by trying to stop sinning. Love is something that comes to us from God. It's something we can display only by having the Spirit of Christ in ourselves. Now, it's possible for us to put forth the pretense or appearance of what the world thinks of as love. *That* we can do. And many people in the church do just that by setting aside God's truth in order to appear to be cooperative and loving. It impresses the world. "My, look how those Christians are getting along! They're united now." Hogwash. They've sold out God's truth; and so, despite appearances, they are spiritually farther apart than before.

On the other hand, taking a stand on God's Word will subject us to the criticism and condemnation of the world. But that's exactly what we should expect, because if you're standing on the truth, you are not of the world – and Jesus said that the world would hate those who keep his words. But by keeping his words ... cherishing them, and diligently seeking to inwardly digest them, the Lord will fill us with his Spirit that unites us in Christ. Our love of the truth will create in us love born of the truth, and we will truly be his disciples sanctified by the truth. May our heavenly Father, who has redeemed us by the blood of his Son, so sanctify and unify us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!