

A Son's Last Request

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Most of you are probably familiar with an organization called the *Make a Wish Foundation*. Its purpose is to help families fulfill the one big dream of children who are afflicted with life threatening illnesses. Maybe they'd like to meet a celebrity or a famous athlete, or go someplace special, or have a particular experience like being an honorary firefighter or a police officer for a day. Whatever it is, they try to arrange it. The main goal is to bolster the flagging morale of such kids in the hope that a more positive outlook will help them better to fight for life against their dread diseases. And there may be cases in which it works out that way and the child survives; but the truth is that in most cases it functions to give a dying child his or her last big request. It also gives the families some happy memories to look back on after their child is gone. Overall it's a good program worthy of support – and a lot of people do support it. In general we have the sense that kids who have been dealt such a bad hand deserve something nice. I mean, every dying person's last request is held to be important – nearly sacred, I should say; but when it's a child – and in particular, if it were your own child – wouldn't you do whatever it took to make it come true?

Bearing this in mind, how much more do you suppose that God our heavenly Father would want to grant the last request of his beloved Son? That's what we have in today's Gospel reading. Jesus is finishing up what's often called his high priestly prayer. He knows that in a very short time he's going to be arrested and his immense suffering to redeem the sinful world is going to begin. He uses these last moments of relative calm before the storm to intercede for his disciples – to make a dying son's one last request on their behalf. And, as he says, not just for them, but also for all those who will come to believe in him through their testimony – the many generations of Christians who will hear the Good News of forgiveness, life, and salvation he attained for them by his death on the cross and who by the power of the Holy Spirit come to believe. And that means Jesus is praying also for us and the church of our day.

What is his last request? First and foremost, his prayer is that those who believe in him may be one – one in the same way that he, Jesus, is one with his heavenly Father. That's going to require some explanation, so let's unpack it a bit and ask: how are the divine Father and Son one? The answer is that the Father eternally begets the Son; that is, in sacrificial love he gives his divine essence – the uncreated spiritual stuff that makes God, God – and he hands it over, gives it, surrenders it, so that the Son is, and so that they are two persons sharing the same divine essence. That is to say that the Son owes his existence to the Father's loving gift of himself. And understand that this is an eternal thing. The Father is *always* giving himself in love for the Son; always has been, always will be. And yes, the Holy Spirit is part of this equation too, the third person in this Holy Trinity that is God; but he's not mentioned in today's text, so let's not further complicate what's already a very hard concept to grasp. Today's text is a conversation between the Son and the Father. We'll stick with just the two of them for now. Besides, next week is Pentecost. *Then* we'll talk about the Holy Spirit.

Okay, so the Father and the Son are one because the Father gives himself in love for the Son. In a similar way now, in going to the cross, the Son, who is both true God and true man, is giving himself in love for us – giving himself entirely, body, soul, and spirit, that we may be redeemed from sin and death and become one with him. This happens when we are baptized and come to faith. Then we are joined with Jesus in his passion, death, and

resurrection, and become a part of his body, which is the Church. That's when we first receive the Son's loving gift of himself. But this too is an ongoing thing. The Son continues to give himself to us, sustaining our very lives by his Word and Spirit, and giving us his body and blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. That's what keeps us one with him: his continuing gift of himself.

So, if you are one of those who have come to faith in Jesus by the written testimony of the Apostles and the work of the Holy Spirit, then you are one with Jesus. And if you're one with Jesus, then you must also be one with his heavenly Father, since the two are inseparable. This is what Jesus means when he says, "I in them and you in me". Ah, but he goes on, "that they may be perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me." This is the main point of Jesus' prayer: that as the Father loves the Son by giving himself in love, and the Son loves us by sacrificially giving himself on our behalf, so we also, who are one in and with him, would give ourselves sacrificially in love for one another. This is to be our testimony and witness to the world: that when people see our love for one another, when they see us patiently caring for those in need, sacrificially sharing our gifts and talents, and humbly serving one another, they'll know that this Christianity thing, this faith in Christ that we cling to, is not just another religion made up by the minds of men. No, they'll see that it has real substance, that it comes from beyond, from God the Father who sent his Son to redeem this fallen world.

And it's here that we might find the glitch in this whole thing. If you take a look around the world of Christendom at large, or if you put the spotlight on any one congregation of Christians – like this one in particular – well, let's just say that this super-abounding sacrificial love we are to have for one another that is to be our witness to the world, it's not always as evident as it should be, is it? We aren't always patient, kind, long-suffering, and forgiving toward one another, are we? No, sometimes we're downright mean and selfish and cold hearted. We're not always willing to serve those who need our help. We're not always willing to give a word of encouragement or comfort to whom it's needed. We're even less likely to give a word of warning or rebuke when it sorely needs to be said to rescue a brother or sister who's wandering into sin or error; but that too is an act of love. In so many ways, we fail in this selfless, sacrificial love that is to be our witness to the world.

And so one might come to the conclusion that this prayer of Jesus – this last request of a dying son – is being ignored by God the Father. It appears that Jesus is not getting what he asked for. And to a certain extent, that is true, at least for the present. And there's no way around it: it's our fault. Our wretched sin, pride, and selfishness – our failure to love one another as we ought – stands in the way. And it ruins our witness to the world. We don't stand out as we should: a bright light in the darkness of this age drawing others to the love of Christ.

Nor can we; not on our own anyway. This is where so many go wrong. They think it's our job to fix things. If we only try harder to be more loving toward one another, they say, if we give more, sacrifice more, throw away our disputes over doctrine and what not, why, then this prayer of Jesus would be answered. The trouble is that we are incapable of loving each other. It's not just that we don't; we can't. It's not in us. That's what it means to be a sinner. When all is said and done, you are by your natural powers incapable of loving anyone except yourself.

And listen: it's not our job to answer the prayer of Jesus. He's not praying to us; he's praying to his heavenly Father. It's God who answers prayer. And he answers this prayer of Jesus, he's answering it even now despite our sin, not by getting us to try harder to love, which we can't do anyway; but rather by transforming us by his love for us in his Son. He does it by killing the sinful old nature in us. That's what happens when we hear God's requirements, see

our sin and lack of love, and we fear God's judgment and are so moved to repent. And then, having brought us to repentance, he doesn't point us to things we need to do in order to show our love for one another; instead he points us to the cross of Jesus where we see his love for us: his perfect, complete, and eternal love demonstrated in the Son giving himself for our redemption and the forgiveness of our sins. Receiving this love and forgiveness is what changes us so that we can love and forgive each other.

This is what Jesus means when he says, "I desire that they also, whom you have given to me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory". I don't know how many times I've read this passage and simply assumed that when Jesus speaks of his desire that we may be where he is and see his glory he means joining him in heavenly splendor and seeing the brilliant glory of God there. But that isn't what he's talking about. It can't be. Earlier in this prayer he said "I'm not asking you take them out of the world, Father; but rather that you preserve them in it." And look: we won't be witnesses to the world of God's love once we're gone. So when Jesus says, "I want them to be with me where I am, it means he wants us to gather where he comes to us in his Word, in his Sacraments, and in his body which is the church. And there he wants us to see his glory – which in John's Gospel is never about bright lights and heavenly splendor. No, every time Jesus mentions his glory in the Gospel of John he's speaking of his suffering and death on the cross. That's where Christ's glory is revealed: in his dying love for us. This is the glory he wants us to see when we are together with him. And this is the glory that he says he's given to us: that we too might die to self and live sacrificially for each other.

And this is how the Father answers the prayer of his Son: he brings us together to be with Jesus who continues to give himself to us here in the church showing us the glory of the cross, and by this giving he forgives and transforms us to be like Jesus so that we too may show forth his love.

We can't fulfill the last request of Jesus, God's Son, or help make it come true. That's up to the Father. But we can place ourselves where the Father does his work: where he gives us his Word and Spirit to kill in us what's evil and to build up in us faith in Christ by which we are counted righteous. That much we can do. We can be with Jesus here where he is, where he shows us his glory – the glory of his cross – and where he makes us one with him by the giving of himself. Let's resolve to do that much, in order that in us the Father may fulfill his beloved Son's last request, namely to make us one. Then, by his gracious action, our love for one another will show the world that the Father has sent his Son to live for us, to die for us, and to reign forever over us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!