

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

John 17:11b-19

The words of our Gospel lesson for this Seventh Sunday of Easter, the Sunday after the Ascension, and the last Sunday of the Easter season, are some of the last words that our Lord spoke before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. And as such they form the climax of what is called Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer." In a way, they are part of His last will and testament for His people and are most appropriate for us to consider this day. And so I invite you to consider those words along with me under the theme of "In the World but not of the World."

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that God loves all people but our Gospel lesson for today reminds us that Jesus has a special place in his heart for those who believe in him. As long as he was bodily present in the world, Jesus took care of his own personally. He called, gathered, enlightened, and kept them in the true faith through the Spirit as he taught and admonished them and as he revealed the word of the Father to them through the Gospel he proclaimed. And he had kept all those who were given to him by the Father throughout his ministry except, of course, for the one he identified as the "son of destruction" – Judas.

But now Jesus' earthly ministry and his bodily presence were coming to an end. No more would he be with his own as he had been in the past. No more would they have the benefit of personal and visible contact with him, something to which they had become accustomed. He would soon be leaving them and returning to his Father in heaven. And so he prayed for them and not only committed them to the Father's continuing care but also assured them in the process that he still loved them and still had their best interests at heart. His prayer that they might persevere in the faith under the protection of the Father who had first brought them to faith assured them that there was nothing, not even the evil one himself, that could separate them from his love. I'm sure that's exactly what St. Paul had in mind when he wrote, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Jesus could have chosen to take his own out of this world with him but he knew that it was necessary for them to remain in the world – just as necessary as it was for him to leave this world – if the message of salvation was to be proclaimed in his name to the ends of the earth. He knew that, for the sake of still others, who yet had not heard or believed, including the generations between the completion of his mission and this very day, his people had to remain here on earth. And this, his first disciples did under the power and the direction of the Holy Spirit. In the world but not of the world, they spread

the Good News to the ends of their earth. And because they did, that Good News has come to us as well.

We, like Christ's first disciples, have been drawn to him in faith by the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit active in Word and Sacrament. We, like Christ's first disciples, have been saved by grace through the atoning work of our Lord and Savior Jesus. And we, like Christ's first disciples, are the objects of Christ's continued love and concern. All so that we might continue in faith under the Father's protection and might live out our faith as His people in this world but not of it.

We, too, can be assured of Christ's continued love for us and the comfort that comes from knowing that he is really still with us, guarding and guiding, strengthening and leading. All this he does through the Word of His Father and the power of the Spirit. This Word is the Gospel, the very word with which we were as Luther says in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, "called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified" and is the same word with which He would now keep us in the true faith.

Our attitude toward this Word, the Gospel, as the people of God, is what distinguishes us from the world around us. Our reception of that Word is the key to our identity as Christ's people in the world. The Word, therefore, is and remains the foundation of the Christian faith. Thus Luther could say, "I have the Word ... and I know and am certain that if I cling to that, then no power on earth nor the gates of hell can harm me. He (namely, God) loves His Word and will hold His hand over it, and therefore also protect and defend all that cling to it."

You see, we have been set apart by the Word and are protected and defended through it. And as such we are bold to be about the ministry that Christ has entrusted to His own – that of proclaiming the Good News of salvation to the ends of the earth. But this ministry is ours only as long as we abide in His Word. If we give up our uniqueness in the Word as we are being challenged to do in the world today we are no longer worthy to be called His people. We become like salt that has lost its flavor or a light that is hidden under a bushel. But as we continue in His Word and are in the world but not of it, we remain in faith united in the Word and our ministry continues to be blessed and to be a blessing to others for Christ's sake.

May God help us to that end this week and always for Jesus' sake. Amen.