

May 16, 2021
Seventh Sunday of Easter

“Receive What It Says”

John 17:11a-19

I believe that when reading Holy Scripture most Christians have their radar up for hearing what it says they should do. That’s only natural. I mean Holy Scripture clearly does have commandments in it, especially in the Old Testament. The New Testament is certainly full of exhortations from the Apostles and others appealing to Christians to live more fully Christ-like lives. Much of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels is directives about one’s faith and life. So you really can’t blame us for looking for instructions from God’s Word, kind of like that witty anagram for BIBLE—basic instructions before leaving earth.

I really hate that saying. It takes the divinely active Word of God that is biblically described as a “mighty two-edged sword” and reduces it to an instruction pamphlet like you get with a Cuisinart blender. The truth is that often when we read the Bible we have to step back and stop asking “What does it say I should do” and simply listen for “What does it say?”

Today’s Gospel text is certainly one of these times: Jesus prays of His disciples, *“Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.”*

People read this and hear Jesus pray about His followers being one and ask, “How can we be more unified as one?” He speaks of having His joy fulfilled in them and we wonder why us Christians aren’t more joyful. He says His followers are not of the world and we feel guilty because we’re so worldly and we wonder how we can change that. He talks of us being “sanctified in truth” and we know we must be doing it wrong, because a lot of our life doesn’t look very sanctified and holy, and doesn’t seem to be reflecting the truth of Jesus’ salvation. We can hear much of this prayer as direction for our lives and in that the law does its work and convicts us of our shortcomings and we feel our guilt.

That’s not horrible. Indeed we are poor, miserable sinners in all of our life. We need to be convicted of this in order to feel our need for our Savior that we might repent before Him and receive the forgiveness He died and rose to give to us.

But what is this really saying? Jesus is praying. **Jesus**...is praying. When the perfect Son of God who is one with the Almighty Father prays it is always in perfect alignment with the Father’s will, correct? So what are the odds that Jesus will get an affirmative answer to that for which He asks? Pretty much 100 percent! So what Jesus prays for here isn’t just a hope, it is things that are going to come to pass. This will be the reality for the eleven disciples who are with Him as He prays. But this is also the reality for us, because the very next verse after our reading is Jesus praying this: *“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word.”* That is us 21st century disciples!

So when Jesus prays “*keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one*” the Father shall do this. He has done this. We are baptized into the name of Christ and are united as one church with all those in the kingdom of heaven! Jesus asks “*that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.*” This stands true also. Admittedly, in the midst of life in a fallen world this joy manifests itself more as the certain hope of eternity we have in Christ. We aren’t bursting with happiness at the funeral of a loved one. But we hope in the joy that will be fulfilled at the resurrection of the dead when we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with all those we love who’ve passed in the faith. This joy is ours in the present in the now-and-not-yet sense that is our Christian life.

Jesus asks the Father “*that you keep them from the evil one.*” The Father does. Satan can’t touch us! We are in Christ! Sins plague us—that’s true of us just as it was true of the apostles, but the victory is ours. The devil can tempt, attack and afflict us in many ways trying to push us into unbelief, but it is all for naught as we stand in faith in the Christ who brings us through it all to eternity in His kingdom from which Satan and sin and sorrow are banished.

Jesus prays to the Father, “*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*” Sanctify is a churchy term that means to make holy and pure. Look around at your life—does it look sanctified to you? Mine doesn’t. Even in my best moments I know that if I look around hard enough, I’m going to find some blemish—a bit of pride or selfishness or some such unholiness—that’s just the truth of fallen humanity.

But Jesus doesn’t pray, “Father, give them the power to sanctify themselves; to lead upright and holy lives absent of sin.” Jesus knows our plight in this life. The whole reason He took our humanity on Himself was so that He could live a holy human life where we cannot! Jesus prays, “*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*”

It’s the Gospel truth of Christ’s life, death and resurrection that sanctifies us! It is His Word in our Holy Baptism, the Word of promise attached to His Holy Supper, His authoritative Word of forgiveness He commanded His church proclaim to penitent sinners—this truth does the deed Jesus requests from the Father—that we be made holy in the Father’s sight!

When you step back and read this wonderful prayer that is the entirety of chapter 17 in John’s Gospel you really miss the point if you ask, “What does this say I should do?” It’s a prayer! Jesus isn’t talking to you! Jesus is pleading to His Heavenly Father that His disciples would be blessed, protected, made holy and saved for eternity! And can you conceive of any possibility that the Son would ask and the Father would say, “Nope! Sorry buddy. Aint gonna do it!”? Of course not. The answer to this prayer is most certainly, “Yes. It shall be so.”

This Gospel good news truth should be the starting point of every Christian. What Jesus is asking for here really is just that God follow through on His promises. And mind you, Jesus is right smack dab in the midst of doing the work of fulfilling these promises. He prays this mere hours before His agony and death on the cross and mere days before His victory is sealed by His resurrection to life everlasting!

The starting point is what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do one day soon! He has atoned for our sin by His cross. He is delivering forgiveness to us on a continual basis in Word and Sacrament. He will raise us, body and soul, to the same perfect and eternal life to which He rose! He is keeping us, protecting us, making us holy and in all of this filling us with the joy the passes all understanding! The Father has said “Yes!” to all of what the Son has asked and will continue to do so forevermore!

We believers now take this out into our earthly life as our most precious truth and reality. Knowing the Father has answered Christ's request with an abundant "yes" and our salvation stands secured, we then ask, "What does this say I should do?"

The answer is, strive to go along with the plan! Live that sanctified and holy life. When you mess up and fall into sin as Jesus always knew you would, repent, turn back to Christ and know you are forgiven. Knowing that through this forgiveness the Father is keeping you in His name, just as Jesus prayed He would. Live in joy, knowing that the Father has made you one with His church, His people, His kingdom, Himself! Know that despite those sins the devil cannot have you, because the Father is keeping you from Satan in Christ—Jesus has the victory and Satan stands powerless.

And if you ever doubt, return to the Word—God's Word is truth. Hear the Gospel proclaimed and know that despite Satan, despite the world and despite the failures of your own self, the Father honors Jesus' request that you be sanctified in the truth—God's word is truth.

"What does this say I should do?" isn't a bad question when it comes to reading Holy Scripture, but ultimately it is a very secondary question. What does this say Jesus has done? What does this say God has promised? Answer these in truth and you have eternal life in the kingdom. And what you should do is simply and joyfully live your life therein.

Amen.