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HOLY FATHER, HOLY WORD, HOLY PEOPLE
John 17:11b-19; Easter 7B; May 11-12, 2024

The Gospel Reading for the Seventh Sunday of Easter is set on the night Jesus was betrayed, before He died. The last thing Jesus did before leaving for the Garden of Gethsemane was pray for His disciples and the people who would believe in Him after His death, resurrection, and ascension. This prayer in John 17 has come to be known as Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer." One of the jobs of the Old Testament priests, especially the High Priest, was to pray to God on behalf of the needs of the people, to intercede, be a go-between for the people to God. Jesus prayed for His disciples that night, as well as for us and all others who would believe in Him.

How much Jesus' disciples understood that night about what He was praying for and how it applied to them is debatable. And even we, who hear His words from the other side of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, might find His words somewhat mysterious. What did Jesus pray for in the "High Priestly Prayer"? Keep in mind that, how Jesus prays teaches us how to pray. The things Jesus prays for to God our Father are the same things we should be praying for, trusting that we will receive them from God.

What are some key words in Jesus' Prayer that identify His concerns? Holy, sanctify, and consecrate. In English, these three words sound completely different from each other, but in the original Greek of the New Testament they all share the same root of the word for "holy." There is another old English word for holy that we still use in the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed," as in, "**Hallowed be Thy name.**" The Third Commandment requires us to keep the Sabbath Day holy. "**Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy,**" that is, "**sanctify**" or "**consecrate**" the Sabbath Day.

Jesus prays using these key words: holy, sanctify, and consecrate. God is holy. To sanctify means to make holy. To consecrate is to set apart as holy. A central concern of Jesus in this section of the High Priestly Prayer is holiness: the Father's, His, and ours. Jesus' prayer focuses on our holy Father, His holy Word, and His holy people.

[1.] Jesus begins with confessing His Father's holiness.

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 (Jesus means Judas Iscariot), 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.

Jesus prays to His **Holy Father**. God describes Himself in the Old Testament as holy (שׁדק). A typical example is found in Leviticus 11. **“For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate (set apart as holy) yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy”** (11:44). To be “holy” is to be set apart and different from what is profane, not holy. God’s holiness sets Him apart as the only true God; there are no other gods besides Him.

Because God is holy, His name, *Yahweh*/the LORD, is holy. Jesus prays that His Holy Father keep us in His name, so we may be one with God in His holiness even as Jesus, the Son, is one with God the Father in His holiness. I could spend hours just on the name of the LORD and what it means, but for today’s purposes it is enough to remember that this is the Name into which all Christians are baptized: **in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

By this holy Name God sets us apart as His holy people. By this Name we are made one with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the Church. By this Name Jesus **guards** us as the Good Shepherd at the gate of the sheep fold, feeds us in green pastures, guides us to living waters, searches for and finds us when we are lost, and brings us home with rejoicing.

The First and Second Commandments instruct us on what God wants for us: that we set Him apart as our only God, and that we keep holy name of the LORD. The *Small Catechism* Second Commandment explanation describes how we keep God’s name holy: “We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it (the name of the LORD) in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.”

Jesus taught His disciples and Church to pray the Lord's Prayer, to pray how He prayed. So we begin praying: **"Our Father..."** much like Jesus addressed God as, **"Holy Father."** Then, we pray in the First Petition to keep God's name holy, **"Hallowed by Thy name."** (Remember, "Hallowed" is that Old English word that means sanctify or keep holy.) *"How is God's name kept holy? God's name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven! But anyone who teaches or lives contrary to God's Word profanes the name of God among us. Protect us from this, heavenly Father!"*

God's holiness is directly tied to our holiness. Because God is holy, His people are made holy, sanctified, by His holiness; God gives His holiness to His people by grace through faith in Him as God justifies sinners. Jesus says that we should **"consecrate"** ourselves, that is, set apart ourselves to live in the holiness of God rather than the profane, sinful ungodliness of unbelievers in the world.

[2.] Jesus prays to His Holy Father to keep us holy. **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 (the devil). 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.**" The Holy Father gives the Holy Word of Truth.

The **Word of Truth** is Jesus Christ, the **Word made flesh**, the Son who was in the beginning with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus says: **"I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"** (Jn 14:6). The word Jesus uses to describe how He does this is **"consecrate."** Jesus consecrates Himself, sets Himself apart as the holy, unblemished and sinless sacrifice. By His "holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death" we are made God's own children and live under Him in "everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."

God has given to His holy people His Word, the Son who would suffer and die on the holy cross to redeem us from our sins. We also have Jesus' Word written down for us in the Holy Bible, the Word which is and spoken and heard for faith in Jesus. We sang to Jesus before hearing the Holy Gospel: **You have the words of eternal life** (*LSB* 156; *Jn* 6:68). In His holy Name and by His holy Word we are made God's children, forgiven our sins, and promised everlasting life.

[3.] We are God's holy people. Jesus prayed, "**for their sake I consecrate Myself** (set Myself apart as a holy sacrifice to God), **that they also may be sanctified** (made holy) **in Truth.**" *Luther's Small Catechism* on the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed summarizes the work of the Holy Spirit as "sanctification." How does the Holy Spirit sanctify us, make us God's holy people? "He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all [our] sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise [us] and all the dead, and give eternal life to [us] and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true."

To be sanctified as God's holy people means that, even though we remain sinners in this dying world, we are "**not of this world**" any longer by faith in Jesus; we are saints, God's holy ones. We are of God. We are set apart from the world of sin and unbelief and made holy by the blood of Jesus. Because Jesus consecrated Himself, sets Himself apart as our sacrifice of atonement on the cross, we have been consecrated, set apart as God's holy people not of this world. As Jesus prays and promises to **guard...and keep us from the evil one**, the devil, we pray to the same Father, "**And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**" We pray that our holy, heavenly Father would "guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice."

Holy Father, Holy Word of Truth, and Holy People of God – Jesus' prayer is our prayer: Holy Father, keep us in Your name, which You have given Your Son, that we may be one as You are one. Sanctify us in Your Word of Truth, Jesus, the Word made flesh, who consecrated Himself as a sacrifice for us and our salvation to be sanctified in Truth by Your Holy Spirit. Amen.