

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

GOD'S MISSION OF LOVE  
John 17:20-26; Easter 7C; May 31-June 1, 2025

**P** Alleluia! Christ is risen!

**C** He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, what would you pray for today?

One of my duties as a pastor is to visit the sick and shut-ins, who are usually some of the oldest members of our congregation. Those visits typically end with a brief service: Confession and Absolution, a Scripture Reading and devotion, confessing the Apostles' Creed, praying the Lord's Prayer, receiving the Lord's Supper, concluding with a prayer and the Benediction. Before the final prayer, I often ask members if they have any prayer requests.

What I am most often asked to pray for are their children and grandchildren, some of whom were baptized and confirmed right here. Many have moved away. Some of have joined non-Lutheran congregations or stopped attending church at all. What is on the hearts of these (mostly) elderly members, who know that their days on this earth will be coming to an end sooner than later? It is that their family members would be Christians who will join them in heaven with Jesus.

There is concern, and sometimes fear, that they will never see their family members again after they die because they have lost or rejected the Christian faith. This concern arises from love. They love Jesus as their Lord and Savior; they love their family members and don't want them lost forever to sin and unbelief.

Our Gospel Reading today is from a prayer of Jesus to His Father spoken in the hearing of His disciples. He prayed it the night before He suffered and died on the cross. Judas Iscariot had already left to betray Him. Jesus knew He was about to die. We get to hear what was on Jesus' heart, what He lifted up to God His Father as He faced His death. What did Jesus pray for knowing He was about to die? Listen to the prayer again knowing the circumstances.

**“I do not ask for these [My Twelve disciples] only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in you, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given Me, may be with Me where I am, to see My glory that You have given Me because You loved Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know You, I know You, and these know that You have sent Me. I made known to them Your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them.”**

Jesus prayed for His disciples who believed in Him. Jesus prayed for those who would become His disciples by hearing and believing the Word of the Gospel preached by His disciples and the Church after His death and resurrection. Jesus prayed for unbelieving people whom He described as **“the world.”**

A reliable rule of thumb when reading John’s Gospel and Epistles is that, when we come across references to **“the world,”** they are referring to unbelievers in this world, people who do not believe in the one true God, and His Son, Jesus Christ, people needing to be saved by faith. We heard Jesus in today’s Gospel say: **the world does not know You** [God the Father].

Another reliable rule of thumb is Jesus in John’s Gospel uses **“know”** and **“believe”** interchangeably. To **“know”** the Son and His Father is to **“believe,”** to have true faith in God. The Holy Spirit works this faith in people, the Spirit whom Jesus promised to His Church, something we will celebrate next week on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus’ glory was to make known the love of God for the world by His suffering, death, and resurrection. Keep in mind Jesus’ words in John 3:16. **“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”**

We know why Jesus prayed this that night: He loved His disciples with the love His Father had for Him. He loved the unbelieving world and the people who would come to faith in Him through the Word proclaimed by His disciples and Church. Jesus knew He would die the next day so He prayed that none of the disciples whom God had given Him would be lost. He prayed that the unbelieving world would come to know God's love and believe in Him as their Savior too.

Jesus' prayer that night has come to be known as His "High Priestly Prayer," One of the main duties of God's priests is to offer sacrifices to God. Jesus was about to sacrifice Himself on the cross for the life of the world. This was His "**glory**" by which He would "**glorify**" His Father. For this reason He had been sent into the world. Jesus' mission was to love the world so people would know God's love for them and come to faith in Jesus.

Note in the Gospel how Jesus describes why He was sent. **"so that the world may know that You [Father] sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me... O righteous Father, even though the world does not know You, I know You, and these know that You have sent Me. I made known to them Your name... that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them."**

After Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to His disciples on the first Easter evening, He returned to this theme of sending. Jesus said to them: **"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you."** And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, **"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld"** (Jn 20:21-23). The Father's mission of love in sending the Son involves sending the Holy Spirit for faith and life. (The word "mission" comes from the Latin word for "send.")

God's mission of love is to know the Father and the Son through the work of the Holy Spirit by the preaching of God's Word in Christ Jesus. This love is shown in forgiving our sins for Jesus' sake. Our faith is that God sent His Son to forgive our sins by His glorious suffering and death on the cross and rising from the dead. This forgiveness is received by faith. Jesus' mission is given to the Church: show God's love by preaching forgiveness in Jesus' name.

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Why are parents and grandparents concerned that their children and grandchildren have stopped going to church? Why do they pour out their hearts concerned that their grandchildren have never been baptized, or openly say that they don't believe in God? The answer is that they love them and don't want them to be lost and condemned.

God's Word clearly and plainly says that only those who keep the true faith in God are saved eternally. We are warned not to give up the faith because God will judge and condemn to hell those who die without faith in Him. When our family members apparently deny faith in Jesus by their words and actions, that is worrying. When we die in faith, we know that God loves us and will take us to be with Him forever in heaven, but we want our loved ones to join us there one day, not burn in hell forever. With the loss of true faith comes the loss of God's forgiveness of sins in Jesus. What can we do?

We can pray like Jesus did. What should we pray? That the Holy Spirit will work in their hearts to call them back to faith – if they have lost their faith – and to repent of their sins of rejecting God's love for them in Jesus. We pray that the allure of this unbelieving world would not pull them away from the Church. We pray that God would make known His name to them in the water and Word of Holy Baptism: **the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**. We pray that God would gather them into His loving arms as His children, that they know the love of God now and forever.

And when we have prayed, we go on the mission God has sent us. You and I cannot convert anyone to faith; only God the Holy Spirit does that, and that through the Word of Christ. God is sending us to them with the saving Word. How will those lost in sin repent and believe unless someone goes to them with the Word of Christ? They won't. But won't they be offended by what we say to them! Which is worse: offending someone with God's Word, or them going to hell?

God is sending us on a mission of love. Our prayer is that God the Holy Spirit work faith in the Father and His Son Jesus, that all **may know that the Father sent the Son and has loved them even as He loved His Son**. Amen.