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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11, John 17:1-11
Our Ascended Intercessor

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this morning's sermon, I call it "Our Ascended Intercessor." My text is our Gospel Lesson from John 17. I begin with these simple words of Jesus from verse 9:

⁹I am praying for them... (John 17:9, RSV)

He means his disciples. Jesus is praying for his disciples. The good news of our faith is that as Jesus prayed for his disciples during his earthly life, he prays for them still. He is ascended to the right hand of God the Father, but he does not simply rest there. Rather, he prays on for his disciples. Furthermore, he prays for those who have believed on him through their testimony, which means you and me.

Some people in this world have none to pray for them. That is a very sad condition to be in, when no one cares enough for you to pray for you. For some of us, as long as mother and father lived, we knew they prayed for us, and we were grateful for those prayers. But if there were no one else in this world to pray for us, then our great Intercessor still prays for us continually, and that is worth everything.

Earlier this week I met with a group of eight seminarians here in our church nave. My assignment was to talk with them about urban ministry. I began by holding up for them this confidential sheet of paper. It is my prayer list, with names and concerns on both back and front of this page. Many of you have been on this personal prayer list over the years. The names on this list come and go according to my sense of whether you are flourishing or struggling.

I explained to the seminarians that a first responsibility of a city pastor is the same as a first responsibility of a country pastor: It is to be praying for our people, and for our land, and for our world. I commended to them Martin Luther's treatise *A Simple Way to Pray*, with Luther's theme that prayers should often be built on sacred text, as if we should first listen to what God has to say to us, and then answer back with our prayers. For years, I have been building my prayers on the Psalms.

Well, it is good that I pray for you. But it is even better that Jesus prays for you. And that is what this sermon is about. Our ascended Lord Jesus is putting in a good and gracious word for you with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. This means life is much better than we might have thought.

First, some texts

Before we turn to the prayer of Jesus for his disciples, let me lift up some texts, all to the point that our ascended Jesus is praying for you and me too. The first text that comes to mind is nearby to this morning's Gospel Lesson, from John 17. In the night in which he was betrayed, when Jesus is praying with his disciples, he also prays these words, glad to say:

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; (John 17:20, KJV)

That's us! We are among those who have believed on Jesus through the word of the apostles.

Next, we read of the high priestly office of Jesus in Hebrews 7:

...he always lives to make intercession...²⁶For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. (Hebrews 7:25-26, RSV)

Finally, let me repeat for you a text that rings forth in this church just about every Sunday. It is from the Great Thanksgiving in the Holy Communion. The end of that Thanksgiving goes like this:

☐ Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place, and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes as victorious Lord of all.

Jesus is not the only one in this world who is praying. We pray along with the whole Communion of Saints "of every time and every place." So, Jesus is not the only one praying. But he is indeed praying, and our own prayers are sanctified by being united with his "ceaseless petitions."

Let this be established, then, in our thinking: Our ascended Lord Jesus is praying for us.

What Jesus is praying for

Now, let consider what he is praying for. What is the content of his prayer? To answer this I want to weave together three verses from our Gospel text, which taken together add up to the idea that what Jesus prays for is that we should have a certain kind of knowledge – an uplifting knowledge. What Jesus prays for is that his disciples not lose the slant on life that he would has taught them. Jesus has given them new insight into God, and he does not want them to lose that insight, for if they do, they cannot live as fully as he wishes them to.

Can an insight be so important?

Let me build up to these three verses by first asking the question, “Can *an insight* really be so important? Can it really matter so much that the disciples and you and I should have a correct notion about God and about his nature? Is knowledge of divinity really that important?”

In answer to that, I simply remind anyone who has ever been in love how wonderful it was for you when you learned that the one who had captured your heart also loves you! and that you had captured her heart too, his heart too. Carol and I recently celebrated our thirty-second wedding anniversary. I will never forget the moment when I came to understand, long ago now, that she loved me too. In a way, that knowledge meant that the rest of my life was going to be good. I knew then that it was worth trying to be my best. I knew for whom I could try to be my best. The knowledge of her love set life right for me.

And on top of that, we each believed that *God* loves us too, and therefore our life together was not going to be in vain. Knowing that God loves us too meant that reality was on our side. Knowing that we loved each other and that God loves us and blesses our marriage meant that we could hop to it with joy. And it has been a good way of life. Knowing of someone’s love for me has strengthened and blessed my life.

This is the kind of knowledge that Jesus talks about in his prayer in John 17. He has taught the disciples something good about God, and he does not want them to lose it. In fact, abundant life, even eternal life consists in walking in the radiance of God’s love.

That they may continue

So, let’s turn to the three verses on my mind. It seems clearest to me to begin with the last of the three verses. It is the prayer of Jesus that the disciples not lose their understanding of the goodness of our God. Jesus phrases that in terms of the “name” of God. I will talk about the “name” of God some more soon. But for now, simply listen to this divine prayer of Jesus and notice his concern that his disciples not lose something he has taught them. If you want to follow along in the Bible or in your worship folder, it is the last verse of our Gospel Lesson, John 17:11:

¹¹And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, *keep them in thy name*, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.” (John 17:11, RSV)

The key phrase I am lifting up is the one about “keep them”: “keep them in thy name.” This is a prayer for the faith of the disciples, that it not waver or fade away.

The name of God

Next, let's look at the idea of the "name" of God. Jesus has prayed that his holy Father keep the disciples in his "name." Now, in verse six we learn that Jesus believes that he has accomplished for his disciples what he set out to do: he has revealed the "name" of God to his disciples. The verse goes this way:

⁶I have manifested *thy name* to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; (John 17:6, RSV)

To enjoy this verse properly, we need to be thinking about the notion of a "name" as the Bible does. In the Bible, a name is not simply a collection of sounds connected with a thing. Rather, it is a *revelation* of the thing. The name reveals the character of the thing. Indeed, the original and beautiful work of Adam was to name the animals.

And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.
(Genesis 2:19, KJV)

If sin had not intervened, Adam could have spent eternity doing this good work. I need only think of my younger son, David, to help me imagine how delightful this would have been for Adam. I mean, if my son David could spend his whole life getting to know God's creatures better and better so that he really knew their character inside and out, that would be a good life for my son. Indeed, he has already spent a good deal of his young life at that work. In the Bible's language, David has been learning the "name" of the animals.

Well, in the high priestly prayer of Jesus, our Lord tells his holy Father that he has manifested "thy name" to his disciples. This means, Jesus has done all he could to reveal the true nature of God to his disciples.

And what is that nature? It is love. To see that, we can simply hearken back to Chapter Three in John's Gospel:

¹⁶For God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17, KJV)

Or we think of the magnificent opening verse of the farewell discourse of Jesus with his disciples. There the evangelist speaks of Jesus own manifestation of the love of God:

¹Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (John 13:1, RSV)

A final quick text along these lines – a great text summarizing the theme of St. John and his followers. This line is from 1 John 4:

¹⁶So we know and believe the love God has for us. God *is* love... (1 John 4:16, RSV)

God *is* love – lock, stock, and barrel. This is the name that Jesus has manifested to his disciples: God is love. You might have thought God distant, removed, indifferent. If he were, then you would be in trouble. But the good news is that God *is* love.

Eternal life

The final part of our Lord's prayer that I want to lift up is the part that concerns "eternal life." Jesus says that eternal life flows from knowing God aright. Verse 3 goes this way

³And *this* is eternal life, that they *know thee* the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent. (John 17:3, RSV)

This is the part that I find especially on my heart these days. I fear for our world, because too often it does not know the true character of God. We have young people growing up believing that there is no God. Or if they hear tell of God, they have no understanding of his profound love for them – for *them* personally. It would be like me staggering on in life without Carol and her love for me. If the Church does not reveal the name of God to the world – I mean reveal the real nature of God and his love for the world – then humanity has to stagger onwards in a cold universe. It can drive people to despair, to violence, to cruelty, to madness like I fear for the young man who recently randomly shot people near the college in California.¹

Jesus says that "this is eternal life, that they *know thee*..." It is the mission of the church, and each local congregation like ours, that our children and everybody we can reach should grow up knowing the nature of reality: that the world is finally good and loving and asks us to be that way too.

¹ http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2014/05/uc_santa_barbara_drive-by_shooter_kills_7.html

Trinitarian structure

Well, let me finish up this sermon by observing the Trinitarian structure of our Gospel Lesson. First we have the holy Father to whom Jesus is praying. What a sweet word that is and ought to be: Father. In heaven, we have a good Father. I hope that you have a good father on earth too. But at least in heaven, you have a good Father. That is the first person of the Holy Trinity.

And then we have the Second Person: our ascended Intercessor Jesus Christ. He is praying for us always, and that is worth a lot in this world.

And next Sunday – Pentecost Sunday -- we will focus on the Third Person of the Holy Trinity: I mean the Holy Spirit. There is power from on high available for you and me, if we will have it. There is power for a life of love appropriate to the nature of reality. That is, there is power available for us to be the people of love we were created to be from the beginning.

In total, we live in the midst of the three Divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and this is the Gospel. To them be the glory, now and forever. Amen.