

John 17:11b-19
Easter 7B + May 13, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Sanctified in Truth

The Word of the Lord from John 17: Jesus said, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth." This is the Word of the Lord.

One last time for this Easter season ... dear hearers in Christ, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Christ is risen indeed, and the risen Lord still prays for you what He prayed for His disciples just before He was betrayed: "Sanctify them in the truth." It sounds kind of funny, because I can make a great case that the truth is that you're not very sanctified at all.

Do you really want the truth about you to be public knowledge for all to see? Not just the good things, but your darkest thoughts or even just the garbage that your idle mind wanders to? I submit that you do not.

When someone asks you what you're thinking, there are times where it's a very good idea not to tell them. The truth could get you a slap across the face. Maybe a visit from authorities.

Like everybody else here, you hold a lot of stuff in. You don't act the way you want. You have manners. You're polite. You don't eat like a barnyard animal. You don't sound like one, either.

You keep your sins to yourself. You don't list them on your resume or post them on Facebook. If you're going to share them with anyone, the place for that is private confession and absolution. Get them confessed and forgiven where it's all kept confidential.

You clean up before you come to church: showers and hygiene are in. Bed-head and dirty clothes are out. You don't want to be seen in your natural state of disarray.

When it's time for the children's sermon, parents do not want me to ask their kids what mommy and daddy are like around the house. We put on a good face in public, but we figure at home that we can let down because the family has got to put up with us, and it's just not that easy be nice all the time. I remember back when my wife and kids were taking sign-language classes: a member asked one of my young boys what his favorite sign was. He promptly made the signs for "grouchy dad." Thanks, son. Stuff like that makes me...grouchy.

Before we go any further, let me say this: the point of this is not for you to purpose to be more genuine. Don't think you're doing us all a favor if you drop the façade and bring your stinky, belchy self to give your unvarnished and uncharitable opinions, and to creep us out with your weirder thoughts. There is definitely a problem with "too much information" these days. There's a reason why self-discipline is so important: it's to restrain the bad within.

What is my point? The truth is that, by nature, you're not all shiny and sanctified at all. The truth is that you're naturally sinful and given to corruption: and these little amusing traits we've mentioned are really only the tip of the iceberg. Everyone knows this: this isn't a particularly Christian truth. Everyone hides the bad in them and puts on a better front. Nearly everyone is thinking, "Boy, if they knew the 'real me,' they wouldn't like me so well." It's sort of a universal acknowledgment of original sin: even those who deny the idea of evil want to appear better than they are.

This is an important truth for reasons you might not imagine. As we've already noted, of course we want to hide and suppress the sinner in us as much as possible. At the same time, though, we also want to acknowledge that there is an ugly old Adam in each one of us, that the gathering of a congregation is a gathering of sinners. If we fail to recognize that truth, then we'll stop acknowledging it. If we stop acknowledging it, several things will happen. One is that we'll see no need for forgiveness for ourselves. Another is that, once the pride takes hold, we won't want sinners and "people with problems" around, because they'll drag us righteous people down. Yet another is that we'll get snippy with each other, because we'll expect each other not to make mistakes. Not only that, but if we don't acknowledge that we're sinners, people who feel the weight of sin – who are keenly aware that they are sinful – will feel like they don't belong at church because church is only for "good" people.

So on the one hand, there will be those who say, "Church really isn't for me, because I'm in bad shape and everybody there is happy and smiling." To those, we gently respond, "That's the same face that you put on when you're out and about too." The congregation is full of people who struggle with sin and suffer from all sorts of trials. We all try to put on a good face when we're with others; and hopefully, we bear one another's burdens. Hopefully, too, there are smiles because there is joy when the family of God is gathered together, in His presence, to receive His grace and the promise that someday, for Jesus' sake, we will be delivered.

On the other hand, there will be those who say, "I really don't like going to church because I don't like saying that I'm sinful all the time." To those, the response is that Jesus came to save sinners. If you don't like saying you're sinful, well, get in line. Repent of your pride and rejoice in His grace. But if you really don't believe you're sinful, then I suppose that Jesus isn't for you. Good luck with defeating death and hell on your own, though: because the truth, whether or not you and I like to admit it, is that we're sinful and dearly in need of Christ and His grace every day.

Which brings me back to my big point: that's the truth. That's why it sounds a little funny when Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in the truth." Really? Sanctify them in the truth? That truth we've just talked about?

No. What we've talked about so far is the truth about you according to the Law; and while it's true, there's more truth to be told. That's why Jesus prays, "Sanctify them in the truth," and then goes on to say, "Your Word is truth." The Word of God also includes the Gospel; and so Jesus also makes the statement, "And for their sake I consecrate Myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth."

Jesus consecrates Himself, He says. I don't know why the English uses the word "consecrate" there, because it's the same word translated as "sanctify" throughout our Gospel lesson. Whether translated "consecrate" or "sanctify," the word means "to set apart." Jesus sanctifies Himself: in other words, He sets Himself apart for the purpose of setting you apart from sin and death. What does Jesus set Himself apart to do? To make you holy by taking all of your sin on Himself. He takes all the evil, sin, lust, greed, covetousness, grudge-bearingness in you and goes to the cross. To make you better than you are, He makes Himself the worst. At the cross, the Father says to the Son, "You're awful. You're the sinner. I must condemn you because I condemn sin and sinners." That's the Law. Here's the Gospel: God now looks at you and says, "I don't see any sin or sinfulness in you. Why? Because My Son already died with it and for it all. For His sake, I set you apart from sin and death, from darkness and devil and hell. So when I see you, I see the grace and holiness that My Son deserves. You're holy. You're My beloved child for the sake of My beloved Son."

That's the Word that sanctifies. That's the truth that sets you apart.

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As I mentioned before, Jesus prayed this about His disciples just before He was betrayed. Things were going to change, radically and soon. The disciples hadn't had an easy time of it, but they had a unique privilege that you and I do not: for three years, they got to follow Jesus by faith and by sight. They got to see and believe at the same time. That was about to end: soon they'd see the cross, then the resurrection, then the ascension. Then they'd be in the same boat as you and me, recalling Jesus' words to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

So things were about to change. As Jesus prayed in our text, He was sending them out into the world and they wouldn't see Him anymore. That doesn't mean He wouldn't be with them – He would be, though unseen in His means of grace. So just before He "let them go," so to speak, Jesus prayed to His Father for them. He prayed that they might remain in the Word, because the Word sanctifies and gives forgiveness of sins. He prayed, as they went out into the world, that God would protect them from the world and evil.

Jesus likewise prays for you. He prays for you and He blesses you, because you are among those who have not seen and yet have believed.

There's a lot you haven't seen. You haven't seen Jesus, crucified for your sins and risen again for your salvation. You're not a firsthand witness to the resurrection. You haven't seen, but you have heard; and by the work of the Holy Spirit, you believe that Jesus has redeemed you. You believe that you will see Him in glory on the Last Day.

You haven't seen Jesus. Oddly enough, you haven't seen you either – not, at least, as God sees you even now.

You are sanctified. You are set apart in Christ. In Him, you are a new creation, body and soul, mind and spirit – the old has gone, the new has come. You already died in your baptism, and you've already been raised up. You are set apart as a holy child of God. In His eyes, you are holy and perfect, no longer troubled or defiled by sin. He's still aware of your sin, knows your troubles and hears your prayers for mercy; which is why He keeps sending the Spirit to gather you in, to hear His Word and receive His Supper. See, this is the daily life of the Christian: you're set apart and made holy in Christ; and every day, the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh are working hard to desecrate you, to peel you away from your holy Savior and to throw you back into the pit of the dying.

I once wrote an article about the Christian life this way: it began with a child who had grown up homeless on the streets of the city – one more grimy, anonymous face that no one cared for. To survive, he joined a gang – the only "family" he could find, and participated in their life. It meant a home of sorts, living in any sort of abandoned building where they could trespass and squat for a while. It meant food, whenever they could steal it. It was survival for a while, although gang members tended to be in prison by their late teens, if they weren't already dead. It was a life with no future, not hope.

One day, out of the blue, he was plucked off the street and adopted into a family. No rhyme, no reason, just because. Suddenly, he had a home. Suddenly, he had parents to provide and teach and discipline: sure there were new rules, but they were meant to keep him safe. Suddenly, he had his own room and food and an education and a future and a hope. Sometimes, the old gang would creep close, maybe while he walked to school or maybe outside his window at night; and they would try to coax him back into the gang. Sometimes, he missed the company and the common struggle; and sometimes, he missed the excitement of their missions to steal or to vandalize. In other words, he was tempted to leave his new life and return. So each day, morning and evening, he would remind himself of who he was. Once upon a time, he was a young criminal in the company of other criminals, living without hope on the street; but now he was a son in a household, with security and love and hope and a future. As he reminded himself of these things, he wasn't especially tempted to go back to the old way of life.

That's you. Once upon a time, you were one more sinner in a lost and dying world; but the Lord made you part of His family for the sake of His Son, who died for you. He sanctified you – He set you apart to be a holy child and member of His household. The world has no love for holiness: in fact, while the Lord wills all to be saved, the world mocks holy things and seeks to get you back. Daily, you're tempted to forget whom God has made you to be. Daily, you're tempted to forget that you are consecrated in the name of Jesus, and so you're tempted to desecrate yourself once again.

That's why the Lord keeps sanctifying you. He keeps calling you to repentance daily, so that daily you might remember who you were without Him, and who He has made you to be. This is what the preaching of the Word is all about: it is the preaching of the law to warn you of all those sins and temptations that would de-sanctify you, make you unholy and move you from your Father's house to a hopeless existence and a mass, common grave. It is to remind you, assure you and strengthen your faith that you have been adopted, brought into the family of God. You're already there, and just wait for the reunion on the Last Day.

Likewise, the Lord Jesus feeds you with His holy Supper, His body and blood. He visits you Himself to keep you in the family and strengthen your faith as the Holy Spirit continues to preserve you, to keep you set apart as one redeemed by the blood of Christ.

You live by faith. But you live as one sanctified. You live as one favored by the triune God. The Father continues to provide for you and to preserve you. The Son continues to pray for you and to visit you with grace. The Spirit continues to sanctify you, set you apart, preserve you as a holy child of God.

Someday, you will no longer live by faith. You will stand in glory and see the Lord. You will see what it means to be sanctified, as God sees you even now. You will see yourself as holy, without stain or blemish or any such thing. All the past wounds, sins, bad memories and defilements: gone. All that was true about you according to God's law: gone. All the aches and pains and disorders and diseases: gone. These were all things of a sinful, dying world under the curse of sin. They are not for you: although you're still in this world, you are not of this world; and when you are raised up, these things will be no more. You'll see.

In the meantime, know this, for in Christ it is the truth: You are justified. You are sanctified. You are set apart for the sake of Jesus.

You are forgiven for all of your sins.

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