

*Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance. Amen. (Jude 2)*

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, may your Word pass from the ear to the heart, from the heart to the lip and from the lip to the life that, as you have promised, your Word may achieve the purpose for which you send it. Amen.

### John 17:20-26

Good friends are truly blessings from our gracious God. They are people you want to share things with, like a wedding or a graduation, a barbeque or a baseball game. An old Greek man once told me that he could tell within five minutes, whether or not he would be good friends with someone—and then, he would be friends with that person for life, whether he saw them again in 20 minutes or 20 years. Friends are people you want with you to celebrate the high points of life, and they are people you need with you to make it through the tough moments. Sometimes, you need friends to make things right with other friends. You may have disagreed so strongly with one friend and you are worried that you hurt the relationship—so you ask another friend to be the middle-man, a trusted loved one to help get through the tense moments. The right go-between person can make the difference between friendship or disaster. Today, the holy Gospel takes us once again to Maundy Thursday evening, as Jesus spent time with his friends. Jesus reveals himself as our Go-Between-Guy and he intercedes. He talks with the Father on our behalf: **“Our High Priest Intercedes...”**

**1. That we may believe the message.**

**2. That we may be united in the mission.**

Have you ever taken a moment to reflect on your own life? I’m talking about your life in Christ Jesus. How did you get here? When did you start to believe in him as the Way, the Truth, and the Life? Maybe you’ve never thought about that question before. Maybe you think about it often as you look at family and friends who do not believe in Christ, and you confess with Paul: “By God’s grace I am a believer.” Whether you’ve considered how you came to faith in Christ and have remained in faith or if you haven’t, Jesus wants you to know something: He’s interceding for you. Our High Priest prayed for us before we were even born. He said: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.”

This Maundy Thursday evening has been the focus of our sermons for the last three weeks. Three Gospels in a row have focused on Jesus’ activity that night. First, we heard about his love, then his gifts, and now his message. Maundy Thursday is such a profound night for us as believers because it serves as a microcosm of life in Christ. Jesus himself address so much of what we do and experience as believers. Take first the message he was proclaiming this night. His message was the announcement of his impending death and glorious resurrection. Jesus told his disciples they would abandon him. But instead of seeking refuge and strength in the One who had promised to die for them, what did they do? They denied it! They puffed themselves up! They said with Peter, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will!” (Matt 26:33).

Just as Jesus did for those first disciples, he shares a message with you and me. He reminds us how much we need his glory. “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away...” (Romans 3:10-12). You and I don’t have anything to brag about. We are sinful people in need of miraculous rescue. Sometimes our sin runs far deeper than we are willing to admit or talk about at parties. Sometimes our pride puffs us up and we are blinded to the devastation sin brings into our lives—never Lord, that could never happen to me! It’s not my fault the kids are out of control; it’s not my fault my boss is so foolish; it’s not my fault my friend is in pain. And so our High Priest intercedes. He prays to the Father for you and me that we may believe how much we need saving from our sins and from the power of Satan.

Late in his life, Martin Luther returned to the city of Eisleben, the city of his birth to help mediate a disagreement between different counts. There was a dispute about certain rights and the counts had asked Luther to serve as the go-between and help work things out. After weeks of strenuous negotiations, an agreement was reached and Luther could finally relax. But his health was failing him. Three days later Martin Luther died. In his pocket was a small note with some scribbling on it in Latin and German. That little note read: “This is true: We are all beggars.” Convinced and convicted by the Word of God, we are all beggars. We bring nothing of value into the Temple of our God. We come before the heavenly Father empty handed. We cannot save ourselves and we cannot keep ourselves safe. Christ alone must be our refuge; he alone must give us his glory. So he prayed, “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory.” Glory and power in the forgiveness of our sins—this is the message our High Priest prays we believe. Our High Priest intercedes that we may believe the message, spoken through the word of the apostles, through the word of faithful pastors and teachers, through the Word we read in our homes. It is the message of sin and grace, which centers in him. He alone is the sacrifice, the victim, the priest.

This past week I spoke with a young guy, about 30 years old, who considered himself a Buddhist and a Christian. He said that Christianity is a system of belief and Buddhism is much the same. He said Buddhism isn't about believing Buddha is a god; it is a system of different beliefs and living according to them. Then he asked me what I thought: Is Christianity is a system of beliefs, just as Buddhism is a system of beliefs? I have to confess, it took me a minute to think of how to respond. I told him, “No, Christianity and Buddhism are not both just similar systems of belief.” I told him Christianity is about a person worth believing in—Jesus. That's the difference. Yes, we have truths and a system of things we believe. But the message which we believe, the Word which we cling to for life, is the Word about Jesus. Open the Scriptures and you will see him on every page. Examine every teaching and you will see the connection to Christ. Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved! He is the message worth believing!

## **2. That we may be united in the mission.**

The prayer of our High Priest isn't over. He doesn't merely pray that we believe in him for who he truly is, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He prays also that we may be one, just as he is One with the Father. Our oneness will have an effect on our mission, the mission we have to the world around us. **Our High Priest intercedes that we may be united in the mission.**

Jesus prayed with this result in mind: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Jesus prayed for us and all believers to have complete unity. As he is completely united to the Father, so he intercedes with our Righteous Father. He talks to him about us and our relationship with one another. United in Christ we go forth to the world.

But what does it mean to be united in our mission? It does *not* mean that we lose our personal gifts and abilities, as if all of us should be doing all the same things in exactly the same way. The Father and the Son are mystically united, yet each remains a separate person in the Godhead. Just as Father and Son aren't mashed together, so you and I aren't mashed together into some mindless blob of door-to-door salesmen. We are believers in Jesus, and we are united in Him and his Word. We strive for unity in the Word above all. We believe, teach, and confess the same things about who God is and what he teaches us in the Word. This is unity in Christ and we want to live that unity. We are the body of Christ after all. Each part of the body is

different and yet, the body works together to accomplish great things. You and I are vitally connected to one another in this spirit of oneness. **Our High Priest intercedes** to the Father and wants this unity to continue. Satan and our sinful flesh want disunity. The devil wants each one of us doing what seems good in our own eyes, and so Jesus' prayer and our prayers for unity are vitally important. We place our request before our heavenly Father and ask him to hear us.

Why is unity important at all? Couldn't we each take our own little corner and make things exactly how we want them? "I'll deal with my house and you deal with yours." "It's none of your business." "Who are you to judge me?" All of these statements display a heart that is more concerned with self than with unity. Too often we are more concerned with me, myself and I than we are concerned with Christ and his Kingdom. The spirit of unity helps us to look not to our own interests, but also to the interests of others. I am concerned and praying about each one of you as a Christian brother and sister, and I hope you are concerned and praying for me too!

When unity rules, then the world may know about our God and his Son, Jesus . When the body is working together in constant unity of purpose and mission, blessings will follow. Individually we can only accomplish so much; we are often hindered by ourselves. Sometimes it becomes like the time of the Judges where "everyone does as he sees fit." But that's not the unity Jesus is praying for in our lives. He wants a collective unity, because collectively (as a congregation united in the mission of reaching a dying world) we go forth together to confess the message we believe. We confess boldly, knowing that we are not alone. We are united with one another in Christ our Great High Priest. Collectively we can operate a Lutheran elementary school; we can buy a house to use for ministry; we can be part of a synod which trains workers and reaches out to the world with the message of Christ crucified and risen. Together God will accomplish great things through us, just as he did through Paul and company.

Our High Priest continues to pray for us. It's what he has been doing ever since he ascended into heaven. And I hope we are praying too! Pray for the courage to continue believing the message of Jesus, despite the world's attacks. Pray for the unity that only God's Spirit can give. And he will give it—not because we are such wonderful people, but because our High Priest is interceding for us always. Amen.

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