

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

Sermon for May 16

A WEEK OF WEEKS

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Christ prays for the church.

If you begin with Easter Sunday, which this year occurred on April 4, and start counting Sundays forward, you'll find that today, May 16, is the sixth Sunday since then. Traditionally, therefore, this Sunday, is generally referred to as the seventh Sunday of Easter. Next Sunday, May 23rd of this year, will be the Sunday called Pentecost. Why is it called Pentecost? Well, pentecost is the Greek word for fiftieth, and if you start counting the days from April 4 to May 23, you'll end up counting 50 days, seven weeks plus one day. Or to put it more poetically, a week of weeks, plus one day.

That poetic way of putting it was why the Jewish nation, in the pre-Christian era, called the holiday they celebrated on that same day the Feast of Weeks. Among the Jews in that era, it was an agricultural holiday – in fact, all their main holidays were agricultural. The Feast of Weeks festival celebrated the beginning of the wheat harvest, and the first fruits of that wheat harvest were brought to the temple in Jerusalem and offered as a token of gratitude to God for the rich wheat harvest that was now to begin.

We spoke a few weeks ago about how the lectionary readings for these seven weeks of Eastertide, drawing largely upon the book of Acts and the Gospel of John, are chosen to symbolize the idea of a new beginning in the history of the history of humanity, a new chapter in the relationship between humanity and God, in which the revelation of the divinity and resurrected life of the heavenly Christ became the animating Spirit of the new church comprised of the followers of Jesus. The book of Acts gives us the historical account of some of the early attempts to put that revelation into actual practice; while John's Gospel records the mature reflections of the greatest theologian of the early church, reflections that outline his

conclusions about the divine realities manifested and taught by Jesus, the foundational realities on which those practical implications rested.

Our readings for this morning, the seventh Sunday of Eastertidings, bring to a conclusion this season of the Church, and in many ways provide the final bricks to this foundational period.

The selection from the book of Acts describes how the Apostles, now only eleven in number after the betrayal and defection of Judas, select a new member to once again complete the original twelve, in preparation for the next phase of the Church's history, when it will have received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that is to take place on Pentecost Sunday, about which we will hear next week.

Our Psalm reading is Psalm one, which is offered as a prophetic foreshadowing of the distinction which will prevail from this time forth between those who have received and accepted the divine revelation of Christ and those who have yet to do so, a distinction the Psalmist pictures as between the righteous and the sinners. Let me read it again with that thought in mind:

Blessed is the man

Who walks not in the counsel of the [a]ungodly,

Nor stands in the path of sinners,

Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;

2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord,

And in His law he [b]meditates day and night.

3 He shall be like a tree

Planted by the [c]rivers of water,

That brings forth its fruit in its season,

Whose leaf also shall not wither;

And whatever he does shall prosper.

4 The ungodly are not so,

But are like the chaff which the wind drives away.

5 Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,

Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,

But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

And the reading from John's first letter in essence describes the same distinction in the terms now revealed to the Church as having prophetically anticipated the full revelation of the life and resurrection of Jesus:

5:10 Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son.

5:11 And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

5:12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

And that brings us to the gospel reading for today from the 17th chapter of John's gospel, in which we hear the prayer Jesus offered on behalf of those disciples, those first believers, and by implication, on behalf of all those down through the ages who will come to a belief in and trust in Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, the savior of the world. That is to say, it's a prayer for us.

So let's read it together.

John 17: 6-19

This selection contains the middle portion of a longer prayer that occupies the whole of chapter 17. The first part is a prayer Jesus offers for himself, and the concluding part is for the world, those who have not yet accepted Jesus as the Christ. But this middle portion is for believers, for us, and therefore it particularly behooves us to learn and appreciate what Jesus prays on our behalf, on behalf of his new Church.

There are many tremendous teachings in this passage, but this morning we're going to limit ourselves to the three things Christ specifically prays for on our behalf.

The first thing we learn is that Jesus does not pray that we may escape from the world, but that we may find victory in it. The type of Christianity that retreats into a monastery or convent would have seemed to Jesus a sadly truncated version of the faith he died to instill in us. He always insisted, as he does here, that Christianity must be lived out in the rough and tumble circumstances of the world.

Of course we must always set aside time for prayer and meditation and spiritual nourishment, when we shut the door of our closet to spend time alone with God. But these are not the goal of life, but rather means to that goal. The goal is to demonstrate the Christian life in the ordinary life of the world. His prayer is not that we may withdraw from life, but that we may be equipped by God for it. It does not offer us release from problems, but a means to solve them. It does not offer us a life in which troubles are avoided, but one in which they are faced and conquered. The Christian is not of the world, but it remains true that it is within the world that Christianity must be lived out. The Christian life is a life of advance, and not of retreat.

The second thing Jesus prayed for is the unity of his disciples. Where there is division within the faith, where there is competition, where there is antagonism, the body of Christ is harmed and the prayer of Christ is frustrated. The gospel of Christ cannot be honestly preached in any congregation which is not united in love with its brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus prayed that his followers might be one as he and the Father are one; and there is no prayer of his so hindered from being realized by schismatic tension and contention between individual Christians and individual Christian churches than this.

Jesus prayed also that his followers be protected from attacks by the Evil one. The Bible does not discuss the origin of evil in the world; the serpent in the Garden of Eden simply represents an acknowledgment that it exists: in this world, there is a power of evil which is in opposition to the love of God. Our failures in its face are all due to the fact that we attempt to confront it in our own power and strength, and forget to seek the help and remember the presence of our loving Father.

And finally, Jesus prays that we may be sanctified by the truth.

The word *sanctify* means to be set apart. But it doesn't mean simply to be isolated; it means to be set apart and ordained for a special task. When God called Jeremiah, He said to him: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I sanctified you: I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1: 5) When God was instituting the priesthood in Israel, he told Moses to select the sons of Aaron and sanctify them that they might serve in the office of priests (Exodus 28: 41). That's the very image that St. Peter uses when writing to his own young Christian church:

*“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a sanctified nation, a people for his own possession, **that you may proclaim** the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”*

(1 Peter 2:9-10)

But to sanctify in the Biblical sense does not only mean to set apart for a special task, it also means to equip with the qualities of mind and heart and character which are needed for the accomplishment of that assignment. God does not only choose men and women for His special service and set them apart for it; He also provides them with a helper, to aid them in developing the qualities of God's goodness and wisdom that will enable them to accomplish that work, if they will only place their lives in His loving care. And of that special help, that special gift of grace, we will learn next week, when we read, as will do every year on the fiftieth day after Easter, of the descent of the Holy Spirit of God on Christ's disciples, on that momentous occasion we call Pentecost.

But for this morning, gracious God, we add our prayers to those Christ offered to God on our behalf. We pray that we may be of use to You in accomplishing Your purposes, not only in our hearts, but in the world around us. We pray that we may be one with each other, one with Christ, and one with You. We pray for Your protection from the evils of the world that seek to overwhelm our faith in You. And we pray for the qualities of holiness, of sanctity, that may render us acceptable servants to Your will, as was Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, in whose name we pray.