

Sermon - 125th Anniversary of Zion Lutheran Church

Fort Wayne, IN

Exaudi

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Jesus Prays for His Zion

John 17:1-11

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Sermons should not be autobiographical. But I can't read John 17 without thinking about my days as a vicar at Valparaiso University under the tutelage of Dr. Norman Nagel, dean of the chapel, at that time. In the early 1980's the Missouri Synod was still reeling from the after effects of the so-called synodical controversy that came to a head in 1974 with majority of the faculty at the seminary in St. Louis walking out to establish Seminex. Most of the religion department at Valpo at the time were deeply aligned with those who had left the Synod. Tensions were high and emotions were raw. There were those in the campus community who worked tirelessly to undermine the confessional course that Dr. Nagel was attempting to maintain for the Chapel of the Resurrection. Often at the end of a long day-perhaps after some particularly challenging meeting, Dr. Nagel would say "Vicar, let's go over to the deanery for the longer view." That would mean, most often, a glass or sherry or a beer and a good cigar. Then, after we had vented our frustrations and reflected on how we might best respond theologically, the evening would conclude with Dr. Nagel citing his own teacher, Hermann Sasse's words: "Remember, Jesus still prays for His church."

Remember, Jesus still prays for His church. That is in fact why we are here this morning at the corner of Creighton and Hanna. The prayer that Jesus prayed on the night of his betrayal, the eve of His crucifixion is the intercession that He continues to make as our Brother at the Father's right hand. Glorified with the glory that was His from before the world existed, Jesus remains our mediator at the heavenly throne. He prays for His Zion.

We celebrate anniversaries, such as this 125th anniversary of Zion Evangelical-Lutheran Church, that we might not forget. Part of this remembering is, of course, the chronicling of this history of this place. It is the telling of the story of those German-Americans who came from our mother church, St. Paul's downtown, to establish and organize this congregation in 1883. And there stories to be told. Stories of hardship and sacrifice, of flourishing times when the congregation's membership would swell and the school was packed to overflowing and then the saga of those years of slow decline and struggle and a tenacious commitment to hang on to the promises of Christ Jesus and remain here in this place so that the Gospel might be heard. There are the stories of the 26 pastors who have served here these past 125 years with their capabilities and quirks but put here by the Lord to give out His gifts in sermon and sacrament. All kinds of memories...field workers and vicars who have come and gone.....the Walther League of any earlier day....church bowling leagues and congregational picnic and hundreds of little events woven into the fabric of this congregation's life. Some of the memories are joyous- marriages celebrated, baptisms administered, sons and daughters standing tall on Confirmation day pledging to suffer all, even death itself rather than deny Christ and His Word. Then there are those glorious Easter services and the glow of Christmas Eve's candles. Other memories might bring a tear to the eye, as you

think of those who loved and labored here and are now with the Lord in His heavenly Zion. There have been seasons of controversy and dissension; disappointment and loss. There have been decades of harmony-genuine "Concordia" as the Lord's people here united in and under His Word with one heart, mind and mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. All of this history is pulled into our praying today.

The sum total of all of that history as rich and deep as it is does not yet define Zion Evangelical-Lutheran Church. Rather Zion has a history because of Jesus who prays for you. His prayer tells you who you are and what He has done for you. His prayer tells you of the future that He has for you for He has gone to the Father by the way of the cross to give you eternal life. "And this is eternal life, that they might know you the only true God and Jesus Christ who you have sent." He is the Son sent from the Father to manifest His Father's name to the world. The Son has given us the words- words of spirit and life-that He received from the Father that in those words we might have life in His name. So the Lord Jesus prays "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one."

The Father has answered His Son prayer. He keeps on answering that prayer as through His Word, He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies a holy Christian people for Himself, sheep who hear the voice of their Good Shepherd. God creates His church by Word; He also preserves His Church by the same Word, the Word of the cross. Anniversary celebrations such as this one are not really about the faithfulness of our forefathers or our own deep love for this place but about Jesus who works the miracle of the church's preservation. After all, He is the One who promises to build His church and sustain it to the end. He is the Lord who has given the sure and certain promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against His body.

There is a lot of anxiety about the church today. There are dire predictions that the church is graying, aging and dying. Well-meaning church leaders grasp for life-support systems. The truth of the matter is that the church can never keep herself alive. She lives by the death and life of Another, Christ Jesus. He gives no guarantee that the church in every place will survive. We think of places mentioned in the New Testament, where the church no longer exists. There are whole church bodies where the faith was once confessed that have sunken into apostasy and unbelief. With so many magnificent cathedrals in Europe standing empty, we think of Luther comment that the Gospel is like a summer rain shower that quickly waters one place and then moves on to another. Luther reminded his dear Germans not to imagine that it (the Gospel) would be theirs forever. Christ Jesus guarantees that His church will never perish but that promise does not mean that congregations or even church bodies will not expire. We may not take it for granted that our Zion will last forever. The Lord will have good use of our congregation as He wills. For another 125 years and beyond, we hope so and so we pray. But our confidence is not in Zion with its venerable history, its splendid building, its wonderful liturgy or its zeal to proclaim God's Word in this community and beyond.

Our confidence is in Jesus who prays for His church. Sent from the Father as the Word made flesh, lifted up on the cross to draw all people to Himself, He goes to the Father as our High Priest, the One who prays for us. He goes to the Father that we who are still in the world might be sanctified in the truth, kept from the power of the evil one, and finally brought to be where He is.

So today is more than an occasion for sentimental reminiscence or hankering for what is remembered as glory years now forever past. It is a day to call upon the name of the Lord, the name which the Lord has put on us in Baptism and remember that He will never leave or forsake us. It is a day to hear the words that Jesus speaks to us so that we might know the truth that He is the One sent from the Father for us and our salvation. It is a day receive the gift of the new testament in His body and drink of blood. For it is with His name, His words, and His sacrament that the Lord has gathered and sustained Zion these many years.

Jesus still prays for His church. The outcome of His praying is not in doubt. Jesus crucified for the sins of the world is raised from the dead. He has purchased and won you for Himself. Zion belongs to Him; you belong to Him. For the legacy of this congregation's good and godly heritage, we give our God thanks. And in embracing the future which also comes from through His Son's open tomb, we make the words of Psalm 48 are own:

“Walk about Zion, go around her,
Number her towers,
Consider well her ramparts,
Go through her citadels,
That you may tell the next generation
That this is God, our God forever and ever.
He will guide us forever” (Ps. 48:12-14)

Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting.

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