

Stewarding the Truth

John 17.6-19 (St. Michael's – May 13, 2018)

You've probably noticed that *crisis* has a way of revealing *character*. Crisis has a way of revealing character. For example, I'm a very nice, pleasant sort of person... When I've had enough sleep. When I've had enough to eat. When my kids are behaving. But start altering these things and my charm evaporates. My character is revealed.

Mother's Day really brings this home for me...I think of the all-nighters Caity has pulled with the boys. Night feedings, fevers, flus, bad dreams, throw-up etc. And she rarely complains. And then I start whining about a hangnail, or that the Vikings game isn't on TV. It's humbling. And so today, find a mom, any mom, who has survived the trenches with some measure of grace. And say, 'well done. Well done.'

Again, crisis reveals character. I start with this principle, because in John 17 we have a glimpse into Jesus' character, at the defining crisis of his life. If you recall, this is Jesus' last night on earth. He's eaten his last meal with his friends. In a few hours He's going to be dead.

What would you do if you only had 18 hours to live? What would you be thinking about? Your response would reveal a lot about your character. And it does so with Jesus.

Verse 1: 'He lifted up his eyes to heaven.' What's the first thing Jesus does? He prays. And notice his posture – he 'lifted up his eyes to heaven.' Looking upward, outward, beyond himself to God.

In contrast, so much of New Age and secular humanism urges us to look *inward*. Find the truth within. Be true to yourself.

But this is not the faith of Jesus. He looks up. 'I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help.'

And what's the content of Jesus' prayer? Chiefly one thing: 'Father, glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you.' Jesus' primary concern is **God's glory**. It's not his own personal comfort or needs. But that God's praiseworthy attributes will be displayed for all to see.

What would it look like if we prayed like Jesus? Trouble at work? Father, glorify yourself in this. Trouble at home? Father, glorify yourself. Uncertainty *everywhere*? Father, glorify yourself.

I suspect we'd have a lot less stress if our primary concern was not our own comfort, but God's glory. And of course the chief way the Father is glorified, will be through Jesus' death on the cross. Where the heart of God is revealed like never before. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.'

And still today, how do we glorify God? Primarily by lifting up the cross. By pointing to the savior. Pointing to the way, the truth, the life, the source of peace and joy and security. This is how we glorify God.

And so having begun his prayer by looking to the Father, Jesus now prays for His disciples.

And again, this reveals his heart. You know when we think of those who'll come after *us*—our children and grandchildren—what do we really hope for them? What do we pray for them?

Strong grades so they can go to a good school. A stable marriage. A nice house. Happiness. A good job. Personal fulfillment. These are all good things. And yet Jesus doesn't pray for any of them. He has a different set of priorities.

What are they? Really three things jump out in the next verses – protection, unity, and mission. Protection, unity, and mission.

First **Protection**. Verses 11-15: ‘Holy Father, keep them in your name...I’ve guarded them, but now I’m coming to you...so keep them from the evil one.’

Jesus knows there’s a battle. He knows he’s stepping out onto the front line. He knows he’s going to die. And so he asks the Father, ‘Protect my flock. From the world and from the evil one.’

And Jesus then cites two critical means of protection. Verses 11 and 17. Holy Father, ‘Keep them in your Name and sanctify them in the Truth.’ There’s protection in the Name and the Truth of God.

But what does this mean? What is God’s Name and what is the Truth? Well, what’s the name for God Jesus uses here? *Holy Father*. This is the only time in Scripture God is called ‘Holy Father.’ So we should pay attention. Holy Father combines the chief attribute of God in the OT - *Holy* - with Jesus’ own personal name for God, *Father*.

Holy Father thus conveys the most awesome transcendence and the most breathtaking intimacy. God is totally different from us, (He’s holy), but the same time He’s more personal than we can imagine. There is no other god like this.

And it’s by knowing this ‘Holy Father,’ and trusting in His goodness, that we are kept safe. In verse 3 Jesus said, ‘This is eternal life, that they *know you* the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’

Yes, knowing God is life, joy, and protection from evil. While conversely for lack of knowledge, God’s people are destroyed.

But secondly, what is truth? This is easy. ‘Your word is truth,’ Jesus says. Scripture is Truth. As Christians we are people of the book. The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of God stands forever. All scripture is God-breathed and so we preach the Word in season and out of season.

And so again, we are protected by God's Name and by God's Word. Now notice that Jesus is here talking *theology*. Not just swords and shields. Because Jesus is not nearly as concerned with *physical* persecution as he is with theological deception.

Elsewhere Jesus says, 'Don't fear those who can kill the body. Instead, fear Him who can throw your soul into hell.' Yes, what we *believe* has eternal consequences. It really does. In 1st John 2, our apostle warns people about the antichrist. He says 'Children, it's the last hour...and the antichrist is coming.'

Who is the antichrist? People have wondered and speculated for hundreds of years. Emperors and popes have been the leading contenders. More recent nominations have included Hitler, bin Laden, Henry Kissinger, Bill Gates, and Prince Charles. Indeed every U.S. President since FDR has been named as the antichrist with the possible exception of Gerald Ford.

But here's the scary thing my friends. The antichrist John references is not Nero or Rome. Rather it's heretical Christians in the church. 'They went out from us [John writes] but they were not of us...this is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.' Yes, far more dangerous than Isis or North Korea, *heresy* is the greatest threat to the church. Those who deny what scripture tells us of the Father and the Son.

Recently the Episcopal Diocese of Washington D.C. made national news by calling for a revision of the Prayer Book, quote: 'To utilize expansive language for God from the rich sources of feminine, masculine, and non-binary imagery for God found in Scripture and tradition and, when possible, to avoid the use of gendered pronouns for God.'

This is pretty vague, but it's easy to see where it's coming from. We don't like the masculine language for God in the Bible. And so we're going to 'tweak' it. Even though Jesus Christ is the greatest culprit of all. *Holy Father*, Jesus prays. *Our Father*, Jesus prays.

My friends, the truth is there are clergy and churches all over this country who will lead you to hell with a smile. Who will deny Jesus' virgin birth, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, and that He is the only way to the Father.

This is why the apostle *warns* us. This is why Jesus *prays* for us – so that we will be kept in God's Name and in His Word.

Now Jesus' second prayer is for **Unity**. Verse 22: [Father I pray] that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one.' Here Jesus prays that the unity of the Trinity will be expressed in the church.

Now unity is a very pleasant sort of thing. The *only* people against unity are people who are against baby seals and good coffee. But what exactly does unity mean? And how do we get it?

Do we just find a banjo and start a campfire and sing Joan Baez over marshmallows? No. In Jesus' prayer, a prior condition to unity is truth. There can only be authentic unity, where there's a shared love of truth. If not, it's just sentimental kumbya.

Imagine that you brought together a string orchestra. And you really wanted this orchestra to gel. How would you create unity? Would you say, 'all styles and expressions of music are welcome? You all just play what's on your heart?' No, if everyone did their own thing it would be a disaster.

The *first* thing you do is get the orchestra in tune. And once there's that shared resonance, *then* there's space for freedom and creativity. But it's grounded in the shared truth of being in tune. And the same holds true in the church.

Many times in my life I've had the experience of meeting Christians from distant lands with whom I had nothing in common—*except*—there was spiritual unity.

Upon meeting we knew instantly that we were both hearing the same tune. Whether a priest from South Sudan or a schoolteacher from India, you look in their eyes and you recognize there's resonance. And so unity is not something we create by bringing people together and finding the lowest common denominator. Rather, unity is celebrating the truth of Jesus Christ and then asking, 'Do you see what I see?'

And this unity flows naturally into Jesus' final emphasis, **Mission**. Verse 19: 'Father, as you sent me into the world so have I sent them into the world.' Protected by the Word, unified in the Truth, what else can we do but share the Good News?

And mission doesn't happen by saying, 'you're OK' and 'you're OK' and you're OK. No, as one theologian notes, 'The greatest ages of faith have not been marked by interfaith dialogue, but proclamation.' What is it about Jesus that sets your heart on fire? Whatever it is, start shouting it from the rooftops!

We're not called to campfire kumbyas, we're called to announce what God has done. And it's when the church is unified and sanctified in the truth, *then* the church attracts the world to Christ.

And of course the amazing thing is that Jesus, our great high priest, is still interceding for us. His pray is so powerful that it echoes down through the centuries. And so His kingdom advances every single day.

I'll give you an example in closing. On June 8th, 1972, perhaps the most famous photograph of all time was taken in Vietnam. You'll remember the image of a 9-year old girl running naked down the road screaming in agony, after being hit with napalm. A photograph that made the world gasp.

Miraculously, after 17 surgeries, the little girl, Kim Phuc survived. However, she was overwhelmed by excruciating physical pain. And this was nothing compared to the trauma and the rage she felt towards those who caused her suffering.

Now Kim Phuc's religion, the religion of her family, was Cow Die, a religion that teaches universalism. You can worship whatever gods you want. Buddha, Allah, a tree, whatever. Cow Die's famous mantra is 'You are god and god is you.' And so for years Kim Phuc cried out to the deities of Cow Die for healing and peace. And nothing happened.

Ten years later, in 1982 she found herself in the library of Saigon searching for truth. She read books on Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. And finally she found a New Testament. And there she encountered Jesus Christ. The one who said 'I am the way to the Father.' And the one who suffered and died for her.

On Christmas Eve Kim Phuc gave her life to Jesus. She experienced immediate healing...and a peace she'd never known. She was even able to forgive those who hurt her. Today although Kim Phuc still bears those terrible scars, she is now an ambassador for Jesus. And this is what she says, 'Thank God for those bombs, because they led me to Christ.'

My friends this is the power of Jesus' prayer – a prayer that guards us in truth, forges unity, empowers us for mission, and brings glory to God, whatever hellish valleys there may be.

May His prayer be fulfilled in our lives as well. For His sake and for His glory.