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Easter 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“The Power of the Word”

Text: John 17:11b-19

Alleluia! Christ is ascended! [He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!] **Alleluia.**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Holy Gospel we heard today, we hear Jesus speaking from His heart. He is mere hours from being lifted up on the cross, to lay down His life for His friends, for His enemies, for you and me, for all people. And He knows it. And so He does what is most important to Him, the best thing He could do for His friends, for His enemies, for His disciples, for you and me - He prays for us. Because He knows we'll need it. He knows how difficult it is going to be for them, for us. And what do you do when you're concerned for someone? You pray for them.

And in His prayer, the part that we heard today, from John, Jesus said this: ***I have given them your word.*** We use that phrase today. *You have my word. I give you my word.* That means not only that you have words, but that you have my promise. I will do what I have said. The problem with us is that sometimes we keep our word and sometimes we don't. The good news for us is that God always keeps His word. His word is different. His word is sure. What He says He will not only do - His word will do it. His Word is powerful. In the beginning He said “Let there be,” and what He spoke came to be; it happened, it was. He says “I forgive you” and you are. He says “This is My Body” and it is. God's word isn't just a word - it is a powerful word that does what it says.

So to be given this Word . . . that's no small thing. Before now, I have kept them, Jesus says. But now He is going to the Father by way of the cross, the empty tomb, and His ascension. He will no longer be with them in the same way as before, and it is a treacherous world. So, Jesus gives us God's Word, God's powerful Word and promise, to do three things, we heard today - three things that we need: (1.) to keep us from the evil one, (2.) to sanctify us, and (3.) to make us one.

So **first**, Jesus gives us the Word **to keep us from the evil one.**

His Word first did that for most of us when that Word was combined with the water of Holy Baptism. Whenever we baptize someone we say: *Depart unclean spirit and make way for the Holy Spirit.* And the Holy Spirit comes and makes you His own. You become a child of your heavenly Father, and the evil one is forced to flee.

But he does not flee for long. He comes back and tries to lure you away from your father and away from His keeping. He tries to lure you back to your old sinful way of life. He'll make sin look good and satisfying and pleasing, and He'll twist the truth and deceive and do whatever it takes to get you to believe his lies.

But Jesus has given us his Word. And the Word of God tells us the truth. The truth about who we are and who God is. The truth of what is good and what is not. The truth of the past, the present, and the future. And so if we leave this Word that Jesus has given to us, the truth of God and the promises of God - either by not hearing it, not reading it, or not believing it - we leave ourselves open to the lies and deceptions of the evil one. That's why the devil tries so hard to pull us away from the Word, making us too busy to read it, too tired to hear it, or too skeptical to believe it. He knows how powerful and important it is.

And if we leave this Word and its strength and the Spirit of God which works through it - if we leave it behind and try to fight the evil one ourselves - if you do that, you will lose. Every time. Jesus knows it. He knows how difficult the temptations, how good sounding the rationalizations, and how convincing the devil can be. And I'll bet you know it too. So He gives us the Word, and the Spirit that works through that Word, and, He asks His Father, to keep us. Keep us in that Word and through the Word.

That's first. **Second**, Jesus gives us the Word **to sanctify us**.

To sanctify means to make holy. To take something that is not holy, that is common, and make it holy. The opposite is to profane, or desecrate. To take something that is holy and make it common. As in: Don't profane the name of the Lord - don't take His holy name and make it like a common, ordinary word. Keep it holy . . .

But we can't even do that - keep His Name or our lives holy. For if we cannot keep our New Year's resolutions for a few months, or our Lenten disciplines for 40 days, how in the world are we going to keep something holy all our lives! And if cannot keep something holy, how can we make something holy? Well, of course, we can't.

We cannot make anything holy. Holiness can only be given to us - by the Holy One. God is holy, and He wants to share His holiness with you. He did so in the beginning. Adam and Eve were created holy, in the image of God, but they fell from their holiness, their sanctity, into sin. But God has given us His Word to make us holy again, to restore us to what we once were but are not now. Only He and His Word can do it.

We try though, right? Whenever something around my house or on my car is broken, I often try to fix it. But I often don't have the right part to do so, and so I use whatever is lying around. And sometimes it works, at least temporarily. It gets me by. But I know it isn't right, and it probably isn't going to last. Like that car driving down the street with a coat hanger for an antenna, or the wobbly table with a wadded up piece of paper under one foot

to keep it steady . . . That's what our self-made, pseudo-holiness looks like.

So, *sanctify them in the truth*, Jesus said. *Your word is truth*. That's the right thing; what we need to make us truly holy. It is the only thing that can. For the only thing that can restore us from our sin and back to righteousness, back to holiness, is forgiveness. The forgiveness of God poured upon us, the forgiveness of God spoken upon us, the forgiveness of God placed into our mouths. If we leave that Word behind and don't receive the forgiveness we need, we cannot be holy. There just is no other way.

And then **third**, Jesus gives us the Word **to make us one**.

And the Word that does that is not just any word, but a very special word: *His name*. We are marked, we are branded, with the Name of God in baptism. And that is what unites us - that we are all in Him. Otherwise, most of us don't have much else in common. We're different nationalities, we're different ages, we have different interests, different abilities, we live in different places, we do different jobs - and yet here we all are, gathered together here, in this place. United by Jesus. United in Jesus. One in Him.

But not only here - this oneness, this unity, is with others in our Synod, and it's also with believers of all times and places. That we be one with those who came over from Germany and started our church here. That we be one with those who lived at the time of the Reformation, and back through the Medieval Church and back even to the early church. That we be one with 16th century Germans, like Luther; with 4th century Africans, like Augustine and Athanasius; with 1st century apostles, like Peter and Paul; and with even BC Hebrews - the believers from the Old Testament. What else but the Word can do that?

For think about it; think about the unity we try to achieve on our own. How united, really, is the "United" Nations? Or after the tragedy of 9-11 or other terrorist acts, after the shootings that sadly take place today, communities come together, churches are often filled. But that unity doesn't last. It does for maybe a couple of weeks or at best a couple of months. But then the old ways, the old divisions return. Because it is a unity not from the Word. It is from emotion, or nationalism, or sympathy. Only the Word can truly make us one. And it is departing from the Word that causes division among us.

And if there is disunity, it is not by ignoring those differences or ignoring the Word that we will be one again. It is only through the Word that true oneness can be achieved - and not by us, but by the Holy Spirit, working through the Word, working in our hearts. That we repent. That we humble ourselves to the truth of the Word. That we humble ourselves before one another. His Word is the glue that keeps us connected to Christ, that keeps us in His forgiveness, and that therefore makes us one because we are united in Him.

I have given them your word, Jesus says. To keep us from the evil one, to sanctify us, and to make us one. And if we have those things, we truly have all that we need. Think about it . . . to keep us from the evil one, to make us holy, to make us one . . . The trouble is that we

often think we need lots of other things, and we go after those things, often at the expense of the Word and these things that we truly need. But we are not better off. Jesus knows what we need, and prays for us for exactly those things.

Yes, Jesus knows what we need, and so He not only prays for us, He has not only given us the Word, He gives us His very self. That's what this whole church year has been all about. Jesus coming for us. Jesus living for us. Jesus dying for us. Jesus rising for us. Jesus ascending for us. Jesus doing what we could not do, that we have what we need. Without Jesus coming and giving Himself for us and to us, all those words of His that He gives us? They're just lies, a fairy tale. Empty words with no power at all. Wishful thinking. Delusional, misleading, and damaging words, giving people false hope.

But guess what? Jesus' tomb is empty. His dead bones and body never found, because He is risen and alive. And so His words are true and life-giving. All of them. Protecting us from the evil one, making us holy, and uniting us as one. Jesus' prayer *fulfilled*, even as it is still being fulfilled. For Jesus is *still* praying for you. And He will not stop. You are too important to Him and He loves you too much to stop. For He knows how treacherous still this world is. He knows, and so He prays . . . and the Father hears, and the Spirit works. In you and for you. All that you need. For you are His and He is yours.

And so we confidently proclaim, one last time this season:

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

Alleluia! Christ is ascended! [He is ascended indeed! Alleluia!]

He has done it! And when He comes again, He will keep His Word to you. You too will rise, and you too will ascend and be with Him forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.