

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Easter 7 / Ascension / Mother's Day  
May 12, 2024  
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
**You're different**

—John 17:11b-19

What do you do when someone comes up to you and tells you that they're going through difficult times? Perhaps they're facing serious surgery. Perhaps they've just received a life-threatening diagnosis. What do you say? Among other encouragement, you probably say, "I'll be praying for you." And then you do. You remember them in your personal prayers, God hears your prayers, Scripture says the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective, and God answers your prayers as he wills. Today we have Jesus himself praying for you. This is his prayer: "Sanctify them by the truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I also sent them into the world. I sanctify myself for them, so they also may be sanctified by the truth." Jesus prayed these words for his disciples of all time.

Let's take a closer look at that word "sanctify." The word comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, meaning "holy." To sanctify something is to set it apart for a holy purpose. We often use the word "holy" to describe something perfect and pure, but it really means more than that. When we speak of God as being holy, we mean that he is perfect, sinless, and pure but also that he is separate, transcendent, set apart from everything that is base and common. God is different, and because the Father has sanctified you, you are set apart from the world around you. You're different.

John's Gospel takes us back to the night before Jesus went to the cross. As Jesus was about to leave his disciples before he died, he prayed to his Father for his disciples, who would remain in the world. Today, as we celebrate Jesus' ascension, we reflect on his prayer for us, who remain in the world. Jesus says, "Holy Father, protect them by your name, which you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I kept those you gave me safe in your name. I protected them and not one of them was destroyed, except the son of destruction, so that the Scripture might be fulfilled." (The son of destruction is, of course, Judas Iscariot, who turned away from Jesus and served Satan by betraying Jesus for money.)

On that night when Jesus prayed before he went to the cross, he knew the horrors he would suffer. He also knew the trials his little flock of disciples would go through, so he prayed, "Holy Father, protect them by your name." The disciples would watch lonely and terrified as Jesus was arrested, condemned, beaten, and crucified. Then on the third day the disciples were overjoyed when they saw Jesus alive and well after his resurrection, and for 40 days they enjoyed his teaching and his company. Yet even though he promised he would never leave them and always be with them, they weren't going to see him anymore, because 40 days after he rose from the dead he ascended into heaven, and a cloud hid him from their sight. So Jesus prayed, "Holy Father, protect them by your name," as he sent this little group of disciples, this little band of brothers, out into a hostile world. "But now," Jesus says, "I am coming to you, and I am saying these things in the world, so that they may be filled with my joy. I have given them your word. The world hated them, because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the Evil One. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world."

Did you pick up on that? A disciple of Jesus Christ is in the world but not of the world. You're different! You live in this world, you interact with this world, but you're just a stranger and a pilgrim in this world. Your citizenship is in heaven, and you're waiting for the day when Jesus will return, and this world with all its violence and corruption will be destroyed and give way to the kingdom of God. That's the day when every enemy of God will be cast away from God and his people into outer darkness forever. Meanwhile, while you wait for Jesus to come back and take you home to heaven, you're different. You're just passing through.

But here's the challenge for people who are in the world but aren't of the world: We don't like to be different. We are naturally conformists. We want to fit in. We don't want to be called out and be labeled different. How many kids on the playground want to be singled out as different? How many employees at work want to be known as the person who is different, who stands out from everyone else by your speech, by your dress, by your behavior? So the temptation for us in the world is to try to fit in. To lay low. To fly under the radar with our Christian faith. If kids are picking on someone at school, the temptation is to join in on the side of evil and bullying; otherwise we could *become* the person who gets picked on—and we don't want that. If people at work punctuate their conversations with all kinds of filthy language, we're tempted to talk the same way to show that we can be tough and cool, too. If everyone's talking about the latest movie or television series that's filled with blasphemy and immorality, we want to make sure we don't miss out. You see how it goes? You know how it goes! You know how often you've gone along to get along. You know how often you've wanted not only to be in the world but *of* the world. These are sins for which I need to repent. Lord, have mercy! Lord, please forgive me for the times when I didn't stand up for what's right. Please forgive me for not letting my light shine for Christ. Forgive us our sins of being in the world and acting like we're *of* the world!

There are some things where we can't fit in. We just can't! Trying to make a Christian fit into the world is like trying to put a square peg into a round hole; it doesn't fit. You're different. You belong to Jesus, not to the world. Your identity is different. Your priorities are different. The focus of your life is different. You're not a slave to your passions, your possessions, and your ambitions, to your pet peeves and your evil desires. You fight against them. You don't want to give in to them because you're different. You belong to Jesus, your life belongs to Jesus, your time, your hands, your heart, your soul, your all—they all belong to Jesus. He bought and paid for you and all you are with his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death. As Scripture says, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Jesus prayed for the Father to sanctify you, to set you apart, and the Father has done exactly that. He has made you different from the world around you.

And thank God he has! Conforming to the pattern of the world just to get along with the world is foolish. The sinful world, the rebels, blasphemers, idol worshipers, are headed for eternal fire and everlasting separation from God. Do you want to be part of that? Is this short life so important that it's worth going through life with a herd mentality, doing what everyone else is doing just to avoid being different, when one of these days the whole herd is going to plunge over the cliff? If you know what a lemming is—a little rodent that lives up north in the tundra regions—then you know that lemmings will take part in mass migrations in which literally thousands of them will swarm together right off a cliff to their death. Thank God, he hasn't made you a lemming. You don't just run with the herd and plunge into destruction. You're different. It's hard to go against the herd, but you do it because you're different.

God has given you a higher calling. You are no longer one of the perishing herd. You are no longer common and unremarkable. God has given you the name Christian, disciple of Jesus, follower of the risen and ascended Christ. This past Thursday was exactly 40 days after Easter, and we celebrated Jesus' ascension into heaven. From the Mount of Olives east of Jerusalem Jesus was taken up visibly from his disciples, and they couldn't see him anymore. But he said, "Surely I am with you always." He's still with you to hear your prayers. He still comes to you in Holy Communion to feed you with his forgiveness. But by visibly ascending into heaven in full view of his amazed disciples, Jesus teaches us a powerful truth: He is the almighty Son of the Father, the everlasting God in the flesh, and he rules triumphant over sin and Satan, he is the head of all creation, the one in whom all things hold together. This is the exalted Christ whom God has given you to follow. This is the one you call Lord and Savior. This is the one you look to for every blessing. This is the all-powerful Savior who knows your name and has made you his. God has answered Jesus' prayer, and he has *sanctified* you by his word of truth.

Since today is Mother's Day, I want to shift gears and specifically apply this to you Moms: Christian mothers, you're different. On this Mother's Day, as we give thanks for Christian Moms, it's important that we note the huge difference between just any Mom and you as a Christian Mom. You're different. You look at your children differently. You see your kids not as an annoyance or an expense or an intrusion into your social life but as precious blessings from God, who have been placed into your hands to cherish in God's Name and to bring up in the training and instruction of the Lord. You have a different focus in raising your children. Your number-one priority is not to equip them for earthly success, so they can make lots of money, live in a nice house, and care for you in your old age. Your number-one priority is not to pay for club sports, so they can bring home trophies that have to be dusted and finally earn a Division-One college scholarship. Your number-one priority is not to put each of your children on a pedestal and worship them as the mini-idols of your existence. Your number-one priority is to teach them the One Thing Needful to prepare them for eternal life in heaven. You're different because you teach your children that they have sinned and need forgiveness. You're different because you teach your children that Jesus died to take away their sin and give them forgiveness. You're different because you want your children to have a close, personal relationship with their Savior, so you show your children what it means to love Jesus' Word, to worship him in God's house, to talk to him in prayer. Christian Moms, you're different because of all the goals and aspirations you have for your children, your number-one goal is to have them with you in heaven forever. In light of that goal, everything else comes in a distant second.

Jesus is still praying for you. Scripture tells us our ascended Lord Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. He hears your prayers, he answers your prayers, and he prays for you. He intercedes for you before the Father. Unlike in other churches where supplicants are told they have to go through saints to get to God or ask the Virgin Mary to intercede for us, you're different. You go straight to the top. We pray to God and only to God, and he hears our prayers for the sake of his dear Son Jesus. Every time we stumble into sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense, Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for our sins but for the sins of the whole world. Jesus our ascended Lord says to his Father, "That sin was grievous and damnable, but I shed my blood to wash away that sin, and it has been forgiven." Sin's curse has been taken away. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And the slate is wiped clean, your guilt is removed. Jesus prays, "Sanctify them by the truth. Your word is truth." Make them different—pure, clean, holy, forgiven, set apart. And the Father hears Jesus' prayer. Amen.