

**Sunday, May 13, 2018**  
**Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year B)**  
Acts 1.15-17, 21-26; John 17.6-19  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

Just one week before Pentecost, as we near the end of Eastertide, our Gospel selection loops back around to the last few hours of Jesus' earthly life. The events of today's Gospel reading actually take place on Maundy Thursday, mere hours before Jesus is arrested and eventually put to death by crucifixion. Why on earth, in the season celebrating Jesus' Resurrection and our life post-Resurrection, would our lectionary seek to revisit the time before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion? We've been there and done that. So has Jesus. We've all moved on, haven't we?

In fact, as of a couple of days ago, Jesus moved on in a big way with his Ascension, which we celebrated on Thursday. In the Ascension scene recorded in Acts, we are told, "as [the disciples] were watching, [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" (Acts 1.9-11a). I love the implications of the words by the two men in white robes – angelic messengers. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" In other words, "Don't just stand there. Get on with it. Before he left, Jesus gave you your orders. That you are to go out and proclaim the Good News of the Resurrection to all nations. Now get to it!"

Since Jesus has moved on, the disciples have been told to do likewise – as evidenced by the fact that we are gathered here today. If they hadn't moved on and done their job, the Church would have died before it could even begin and we would not be here. And we have, obviously, moved on. While the events of Holy Week are important, while the crucifixion is important and was even necessary, we do not choose to dwell on that moment in salvation history. Rather, we choose to remember and have built our entire faith around the Resurrection. So why look backwards to those bittersweet moments prior to Jesus' death?

What we hear today is a portion of what is known as the "high-priestly" prayer that Jesus prays for and on behalf of his disciples. This is the final time, in John's account, that Jesus prays before his crucifixion. What I find interesting is the tone. Throughout John's Gospel, and particularly during his Passion, Jesus is depicted as being calm, cool, and in complete control. Even in John's depiction of Jesus' crucifixion and death, there is no indication of pain or agony. Merely the calm, almost detached, pronouncement, "It is finished" (Jn 19.30). But here, in this "high-priestly" prayer, Jesus has a different tone. His words are repetitive, kind of convoluted, and hard to follow. There's a sense that Jesus is agonizing over his imminent separation from his disciples. In the repetition, there is a sense of desperation.

Admittedly, there is a lot in this prayer. Just try sorting through it and teasing out a sermon. But while there's a lot there, the key points can be summed up in one verse:

“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one” (Jn 17.11).

In this summary statement, there are two major themes that Jesus lifts up in his prayer: protection and unity.

Jesus starts off almost as if building a case. How God gave the disciples into Jesus’ care. How Jesus revealed God’s word to them. How the disciples have been faithful and received the truth that Jesus gave them. Jesus pleads, “I’m asking on their behalf . . . on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours” (v. 9). He then moves on to the gist of his petition. Words that carry a sense of Jesus begging God to watch over and protect his disciples while he is gone. “Protect them in your name” (v. 11b). Three times he asks, he pleads, that God protect the disciples.

Why do the disciples need protection? Jesus reminds God, and them, that “they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world” (v. 14). They have been told the truth of God’s word. They have been shown the truth of who Jesus is. They have been shown the vision of what God intends for the world. An intention that continues to be thwarted, or at least hindered, by the evil one. A reminder that they have a role to play in working with God and Christ in making that intention a reality. So Jesus prays, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (v. 18). Sent out into a dangerous world to bear witness to the truth of the Resurrection and thereby participate in God’s work of redeeming the world.

Jesus has commissioned the disciples for this work in the world. In this prayer, he is reminding them of that commission and imparts his sense of mission, of how it is to be continued in his absence. The protection Jesus asks for has a specific purpose. “Protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one” (v. 11). That they may be one. That they may be in unity.

Of course, unity does not mean uniformity. They are not expected to all be exactly alike. But they are expected to have a unity of purpose that is not only unified within themselves by also in unity with God and Christ. A unity that is first exhibited by God and Jesus Christ. As John tells us in various places throughout his Gospel, Jesus bears the Divine name. Jesus himself says “the Father and I are one” (Jn 10.30). And as Jesus notes in today’s reading, he has made God’s name known to the disciples. By making God’s name known to them through himself, he has brought them into the unity of purpose he shares with the Father. They are to draw on the power of that name, on the power of what they have learned and experienced over the last three years, on the example of the unity of the Father and Jesus, and allow that to become their driving force. To become their way of being.

This is Jesus’ prayer for his disciples. That God protect them and that God guide them into unity so they may carry on his mission – God’s mission – in the world. We get a glimpse of how that begins to play out in the early Church in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

In the days following Jesus' Ascension, the disciples attempted to remain faithful to the leadership model that Jesus had used with them. That he has commissioned them for. That they as his apostles would, in unity, guide the ministry of the early Church. Since there were originally twelve apostles, and since twelve was a significant number for the Jews – the Twelve Tribes of Israel – the remaining disciples felt a need to fill the vacancy created by Judas' departure from their ranks. As we are told, "one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection" (Acts 1.22).

The community had two candidates that met the basic criteria – ones who had been with Jesus from the time of his baptism until his Ascension. Rather than voting for a candidate based on perceived merit, the community wisely took another approach. They cast lots. They rolled the dice. A process whereby the outcome is determined by means that normally would be considered random yet is believed to reveal the will of God. It is a way of asking for Divine guidance and providing a means for that guidance to be conveyed.

What is important about this is the way in which they made critical decisions that effected the community. They did not do this based on personal whims or desires. Rather they approached it in a way that opened them to listening for and to the will of God. This is in keeping with their focus on unity of the community, which is in turn rooted in unity with God. It is a unity that is centered on the Divine name, not the name of the individual. It is a unity that is focused on the Divine mission, not on individual agendas.

This is an appropriate example of living into the unity of the Christian community. They sought to fill a vacancy for one who will become a witness to the Resurrection. Matthias had already witnessed the Resurrection. Now his job is to go out and bear witness to the Resurrection. In this post-Easter season, as we approach the feast of the Pentecost and the celebration of the founding of the Church, we too are called to join Matthias to become witnesses to the Resurrection. To bear witness to the Resurrection in our own lives.

The prayer that Jesus lifts up on behalf of his disciples is as appropriate for us today as it was when Jesus first prayed it. A reminder that we are sent by Christ into the world, bearing the Divine name of God through Christ. In this name we are at unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ as we go forth into the world to bear witness to the Resurrection of Our Lord in word and action. And we enter into this mission and ministry with the assurance that we are protected by God. If we trust in God and have the courage to discern and follow God's will in our lives, we, like the disciples and the early Church, will not only survive Jesus' physical absence, we will certainly thrive and flourish. So, let's get on with it.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!  
*(The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!)*