

Sunday, May 29, 2022
Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year C)

John 17.20-26

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1048355239375217>

(Sermon begins at about 19:00)

“Jesus’ Prayer for Us”

Today is the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Next Sunday is the Day of Pentecost. Which means we are in the home stretch of this Eastertide marathon. This last week of Eastertide is a bit unique in its feel because, from the perspective of the disciples, Jesus is gone. Out of the picture. This past Thursday we celebrated Jesus’ Ascension into heaven. During the last six weeks, between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension, he has been preparing his disciples for this eventuality. And always quick to reassure them that he was not abandoning them. That he would send his Spirit—the Holy Spirit—to be a guide and companion in their ongoing mission and ministry. We know that it was a mere ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit did arrive. But they don’t know that at the time. So they find themselves in a liminal time of waiting. They are a bit at a loss as to what is happening. Not unlike the uncertainty and sense of loss they experienced during another liminal time just seven weeks before. During that time between Jesus’ death and his resurrection.

Because of the similarities of this liminal time between Ascension and Pentecost and the time between Jesus’ death and resurrection, we find that, ironically, we have come full circle. That the disciples can draw on their previous liminal experience. Our Gospel reading for today—as they have been for the last couple of weeks—is from the account of Maundy Thursday as recorded in the Gospel according to John. Back to the last couple of days before Jesus’ resurrection. And while this may seem a bit strange, it actually kind of makes sense. Jesus was seeking to prepare his disciples for life and ministry without him. Without him following his crucifixion, but also without him—or at least, without his physical presence—following his ascension.

The Gospel according to John contains a lengthy Farewell Discourse that Jesus delivered to his disciples at their last meal together on Maundy Thursday. A summation of his teachings and his final instructions before his impending departure. He ends this Farewell Discourse with what is referred to as the High Priestly Prayer. We hear the last portion of that prayer in our Gospel reading for today. While directed to God, asking for protection and sanctification of his disciples, it is also meant to be words of encouragement for his disciples. Assurance that he is not abandoning them. That God will be watching over them, protecting them, sanctifying them—setting them apart—for the on-going work of the Kingdom. And that he will be sending the Holy Spirit as an ongoing companion and guide in that work. For the disciples overhearing this prayer, Jesus’ words are meant to refocus their attention on the bigger picture. On them continuing his work in his absence. Just before the portion of the Gospel we heard today, Jesus prays: “As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (Jn 17.18). This is

all about preparing them to continue the work he had begun. To give them what they need to do that. And to give them the assurance and the confidence that they can indeed do that work.

Admittedly, there are portions of Jesus' Farewell Discourse and the High Priestly Prayer that can be a little difficult to follow. But if you look closely at what we heard today, it is pretty clear that in the words of this prayer, Jesus' focus is on passing the mantle to his followers. Jesus specifically comments on how this is happening when he prays, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one . . . so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them" (Jn 17.22-23). In many ways, this is the summary of the entire High Priestly Prayer. Perhaps of the entire Farewell Discourse. One sentence that carries a lot of meaning. That carries huge implications for what it means to be Jesus' followers.

First off, Jesus talks about glorification: "The glory that you have given me I have given them." In the Biblical context, to glorify means to make the presence of God visible or known. Jesus is acknowledging that just as God has made his presence known to Jesus, Jesus has made God's presence known to his disciples. Indeed, as God incarnate, God in the flesh, Jesus has made God's presence known through his very self. Through his words and actions. Through his teachings and healings. But this is not just some special revelation that they are to keep to themselves. Jesus is clear as to the purpose for him making God's presence known to the disciples: "so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them." Jesus is clearly telling his disciples that after he is gone, it will fall to them to make God's presence known in the world.

The second critical piece to the High Priestly Prayer is about how they are to make God's presence known. Jesus prays that the disciples will be one just as Jesus and God are one. That the key will be unity. We need to be very clear on this point. This is not saying that there needs to be uniformity. That all the disciples and all of Jesus' followers have to think alike, believe alike, act alike. Because that's not how God and Jesus are. While both "persons" of the Trinity—we'll delve more into that in a couple of weeks—they are unique individuals, just as the disciples are unique individuals. God and Jesus have their own functions, their own purposes, just as the disciples have their own functions and purposes. In praying that they may be one as God and Jesus are one, Jesus is asking that they be united in common purpose: proclaiming the Gospel of God's love to the world. How they do that will be as unique as they are.

And this leads to the third key aspect of Jesus' prayer for his disciples. He prays "that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them." That the disciples, in making God's presence known to the world, in making Jesus' presence known to the world, will be able to convey something of the love that God has shared with them through Jesus. That the message is first and foremost one of love. Of sharing God's love for humanity in word and action. That it will be their example that will carry the most impact. That those whom they share God's love with will know the truth of their message by seeing the community's oneness in their commitment to living that message. Back to the new commandment that Jesus gave them: "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you shall love one another" (Jn 13.34). To which Jesus follows up with, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13.35). That it is through their example, particularly through their

unity of purpose and devotion to the truth of the message of God's love, that they will have the greatest impact.

One of my currently favorite commentary sources so beautifully sums up today's Gospel reading: "In short, Jesus' prayer both assures [the disciples] and refocuses their attention on the new life of loving unity and joy to which he has called them, and to which—through their witness and example—he now calls the whole world."¹

When we look at Jesus' instructions, we always need to remember that he is not just talking to his disciples. He is talking to all of us who choose to follow him. That is just kind of the unwritten part of whatever Jesus is saying to those with him. But in today's Gospel, Jesus makes that explicit. Jesus makes it clear that he is not just addressing those who were in that room with him. The portion of the prayer we heard this morning opens with the words "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word" (Jn 17.20). In the words of the High Priestly Prayer, Jesus is not just praying for his disciples. He is praying "on behalf of those who will believe" through the witness and example of the disciples. That he is praying for all who will follow him. Then and forever. For all time. He is praying for you. He is praying for me. He is praying for us. He is praying for St. Gregory's as a faith community. Jesus is specifically asking God to protect and sanctify—to set aside as holy—you, and me, and our parish. Jesus is specifically asking God to give what you need, what I need, what we need, to make God's presence known in the world. Jesus is specifically asking God to help you and me and our parish to be united in purpose—to be united in our commitment to love God and to love our neighbors. To be united in our commitment to share that love in the world.

I don't know about you, but I find that pretty awesome. That 2,000 years ago, as Jesus was mere hours away from his crucifixion, he was thinking about you and me and St. Gregory's. That instead of worrying about what would happen to him, he was more interested in how you and I and our parish would live into the calling to share his love in the world.

We are not just called to follow Jesus. In his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus passes his mantle to us. To each of us. Asking us to carry on his life and work in the world. And with his prayers for us, we are sure to succeed.

¹ "Loving the World: SALT's Commentary for Easter 7 and Ascension Sunday," SALT, May 24, 2022. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/5/28/for-the-love-of-the-world-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-7-and-ascension-sunday>.