

Sermon for 7th Sunday in Easter

May 16, 2021

John 17:6-19

This Sunday we're standing in an in-between time.

This past Thursday, the Church celebrated the Feast of the Ascension, as Jesus was taken into heaven and in Christ humanity took its place on the throne of the Cherubim.

Next Sunday, we'll celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, that binds us with one another, comforts us, guides us, empowers us, and brings us into the very life of the Trinity.

Today we are orphans.

Christ has ascended. We still wait for the Spirit. We stand in a doorway, both in and out, and yet neither, an already and not yet, when all possibilities are real, Schrodinger's box (Did you every wonder why cats like standing in doorways?). Spiritual teachers call it a liminal space — an eternal moment.

There is no better time and place for prayer.

How many of you feel good about your prayers, or your prayer life?

Hardly anybody ever does.

Today the Gospel gives us an example of perfected prayer. For centuries, the prayer this passage comes from has been called Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer." We could say that the Our Father that Jesus gave us to pray really should be called "The Apostles' Prayer" or "The Disciples' Prayer," and that it is this, the seventeenth chapter of John that is most properly called the Lord's Prayer. It is Jesus' prayer to his own father, it gives us a glimpse of the relationship between two members of the Holy Trinity.

If you, like me, read the collects in the Prayer Book, and think, "I wish I could pray like that," then this should comfort you. It is convoluted, and repetitious. It is vague. It isn't even all in the same tense. And yet this is the inner life of the Holy Trinity, the Communion of the Father and the Son.

Jesus knew that last day would come. He knew that he was human, he knew that that he would die, and be raised, and return to his Father; that he could not stay with them forever. He knew that they were human too, that they would suffer as all humans do, and would suffer all the more because they believed in him. And he worried. Jesus worried about his disciples, being sent into the wide world, without him there to show them the way, without him there to explain how to live, without him there to care for them and protect them. He had taught them everything he could — last week we heard that. He told them that they were servants no longer, but friends. He had revealed his Father to them, but would it be enough? Jesus had tried to teach them well, but they were never swift learners, and he worried for them.

And in his worry, Jesus prayed. Jesus prayed for his apostles, graduates on their own in the wide world. In the part we heard this morning, he prayed that his Father would protect those he had taught that God would protect them and sanctify them and us in a world full of danger that his own joy be in them in all its fullness, that they may all be one.

And here the lectionary does something unfortunate. It leaves out the rest of the prayer, and especially the next couple verses. Our Lord's prayer continued:

20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." This wasn't just about the disciples. Jesus prayed, still prays, has always prayed for all of us too. I find that one of the greatest comforts in scripture.

I don't know about you, but there are days, even months, when I really don't know if God is hearing my prayers. Have you ever had that day? When it feels like your prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling and piling up on the floor around you? It happens to all of us sometimes. But in this passage we learn that even when we feel like the line has been cut or the Wi-Fi is down, Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, who ascended into heaven and is seated at God's right hand is praying for us.

Jesus of Nazareth, the firstborn of all creation, has gathered us under his wings like a mother hen, and is praying for our protection praying for our unity praying for our complete joy praying that we may be with him because we are his complete joy.

But there's a hard place in this prayer.

Why pray only for his disciples and for us who follow him? Surely Jesus loves everybody?

Why does Jesus explicitly not pray for the world?

There's a catch here. The word Jesus used that we translate "World" is *kosmos*. For us today, it has come to mean everything that is, "the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home," But that isn't exactly what it meant. It meant the ordering of things, not necessarily as God intended, but as that order had become. That's why *kosmos* is the root of our word *cosmetic*, it is the illusion that lies on top of reality. "The world order" might be a closer translation than "world"; as would *maya*, to borrow the Hindu concept.

But prayer is about truth, God's word is truth, sent into the world as something real and solid. And all that vagueness, repetition, and confusion of tenses, there's a reason for it.

Prayer is a liminal space, a time when every possibility is open and real, when Jesus is both here with us, and seated at the right hand of God, when the Spirit both moves over the primordial waters, and holds our heart close to her breast, when we are both in the world and not of the world.

When we pray, we enter that eternal liminal moment and can have our own glimpse into perfect communion with God. Let us pray...