

## Discipleship in the Lectionary - 05/21/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, May 21<sup>st</sup>

John 17:1-11

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

### That they may be one

As we approach the end of the Easter Season and final Sunday of Easter, the lectionary text is a section from the High Priestly Prayer from John's Gospel that marked the end of the Farewell Discourse and serves as a transition to Jesus' passion. The specific petition Jesus makes for His disciples give us hope and direction in how we behave during these challenging times.

#### John 17:1-11 Commentary

The Farewell Discourse (beginning 13:1) concludes with Jesus praying with His disciples (17:1-26). It is the prayer that Jesus prays in the shadow of the cross since after the prayer Jesus and His disciples go to a garden in the Kidron Valley where Jesus will be arrested (18:1-11). This prayer is thus the transition from the Farewell Discourse to Jesus' passion. As a reminder, Judas had departed back in 13:30 so there are eleven disciples present. This prayer is known as the High Priestly Prayer (17:1-26) for two reasons. First, Jesus is preparing to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Second, Jesus intercedes for His disciples the same way the high priest intercedes for Israel. There are those who point out that this is perhaps the High Priestly Prayer is the real Lord's Prayer. What we know as the Lord's Prayer could be called the Disciple's Prayer since it was a prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray and Jesus had no need to ask the Father to forgive His debts. There are also those who see similarities between the two.

*<sup>1</sup> When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.*

"These words" refer to all what was said in the Farewell Discourse (13:1-16:33). Earlier Jesus refers to His "hour" or "time" had not yet come (2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20). At 12:23 there is the first mentioning of how Jesus' "hour" had now arrived. This emphasis on divine timing illustrates how Jesus had a predetermined purpose for coming to earth. His life was always moving towards its climax: the cross and subsequent exaltation. By going to the cross, Jesus communicates the extent of the love of God. In this prayer Jesus only has two requests for Himself and both these requests occur here: "glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you" (v.1b) and "And now, Father, glorify me

*in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (v.5). To Jesus, the most important thing for Jesus was glorifying God. Jesus' work of salvation was a means to bring glory to God.*

Eternal life is defined here and is described as a relationship: knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ who was sent by God. Eternal life begins with knowing Jesus: "*And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life*" (1 John 5:11-12). The only way to the Father is through the Son. The word rendered as "know" (*ginōskō*) emphasizes an experiential relationship rather than simply knowledge. It is also in the present tense suggesting this refers to an ongoing relationship. Eternal life begins with faith in this life.

*<sup>6</sup> "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. <sup>8</sup> For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.*

Jesus revealed the Father to those described as those the Father had given Him. This is repeated in v.6 as well as on three other occasions in this prayer (vv.2, 9, 24). The Father's choice is determinative, yet Jesus also teaches the person's response with belief or unbelief determines whether they will have eternal life. Verse 6 refers to the disciples having kept God's word. The Greek word here is "*logos*," the same word use in John 1:1 and 1:14: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*" Rather than meaning the disciples had kept God's commands (which they hadn't!), this expression is perhaps referring to how the disciples believed in the Logos, the Living Word. The disciples had faith in Jesus. In v.8, "words" here is a rendering of a different Greek word "*rhēma*" referring to the speaking of Jesus and is how the disciples came to know (*ginōskō*) and believe.

*<sup>9</sup> I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. <sup>10</sup> All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. <sup>11</sup> And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.*

In the High Priestly Prayer Jesus is praying for himself (earlier) and His disciples. Jesus was glorified in His disciples because of their belief in Him. In v.11 Jesus again references the fact that He is about to leave them and go to the Father (the ascension). Jesus prays for His disciples. As Jesus' visible ministry in the world comes to an end, He prays here for two things. First, that the Righteous Father will care for His disciples so that they continue to live in a way that reflects the holiness of His name. Second, He prays for unity among His disciples.

### Reflections

Perhaps the best way to approach this prayer is to hold onto the image that Jesus prayed these words in the presence of His eleven remaining disciples. Imagine what the disciples must have thought as they listened to Jesus pray. This prayer is all the more significant given what is about to happen next. The farewell words of any famous individual carry extra gravitas. In this case, this prayer is the climax of the Farewell Discourse and thus we have the climax of the climax.

In v.11, Jesus petitions the Father for two things concerning His disciples. Regarding the first petition, Jesus did not pray that His disciples should be taken out of the hostile world. He did not pray that they should be kept safe in the world. Jesus prayed that His disciples continue in their purpose. Jesus had ministered to these eleven men for some three years. They had lived life together. The bounds of affection between Jesus and His disciples are nowhere better reflected than in the Gospel of John yet Jesus prays for their victory rather than their safety. Our

safety is thus only relevant if it allows our execution of purpose. Our earthly safety is not an end but a means to an end. Christianity must be lived out in the world, not in a monastery, inside a church building nor ivory tower. This section of the High Priestly Prayer thus shames many elements of the modern church in the West that either seeks prosperity through a false gospel or seeks to conform with the world in order to get along in our post-modern culture or seeks to reconcile humans with each other at the expense of reconciliation with God.

The second petition is one for unity among the disciples. What is the nature of this unity? Does this mean we all have to worship God in the same way? Do we have to organize our churches in the same way? Do we all have to believe precisely the same things? Jesus prayed for a unity of purpose among His disciples that transcends such differences. Such unity is based on love where disciples love each other because they love Christ. We get into trouble when we love our own expression of Christianity more than we love Christ and each other.

Currently the United Methodist Church is undergoing a very public split between the more conservative and the more liberal congregations. This is the most recent denomination to experience a disagreement among cultural touchpoints involving gender, sexuality, gender identity, and religious pluralism. It is not the disagreement itself, but what happens as a result of such disagreement that is the problem. People of good conscience can disagree on such issues. For Christians, our conscience is captive to the Word of God, not the Word of God captive to our conscience. If Christians in an otherwise unified body after much prayer and reflection find themselves on opposing sides of an issue, why the need for disunity? Why not continue to exist in unity bound by love and humility while still differing on some issues? Could congregations that have differing views still belong to the same governing body? Is this an opportunity for the institutional church to demonstrate to the world how there is another way to handle differences? Is this an opportunity for the church to demonstrate social leadership?

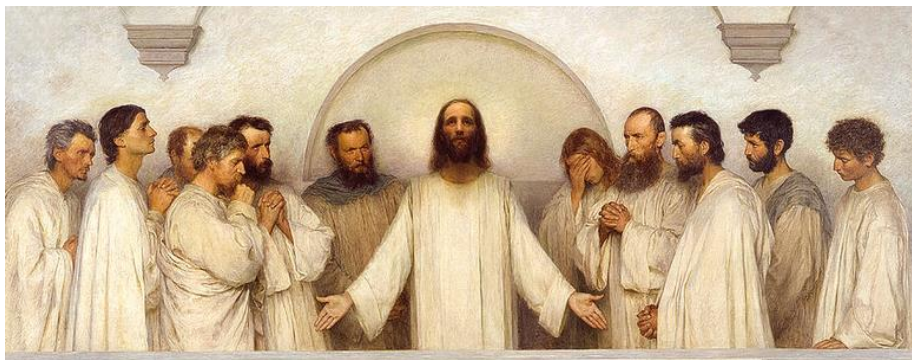
Sadly, in this most recent example, the church has just shown the world it is no different than the broader political polarization that exists within our society; that there is no alternative to such polarization thus whatever results from such a polarized society is inevitable. An opportunity to reflect the light of Christ has been squandered by the relative few at either end of an issue that care more about their egos than they might be confusing with their conscience.

We are reminded why Jesus prayed for unity among His disciples.

#### Application

*...Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.*

Jesus is praying these words for disciples in our time too. If you "hear" these words as Jesus praying for you, does it make a difference in how you listen, understand and act?



For feedback or to be added or removed from the mailing list, please e-mail [david.r.lyons@gmail.com](mailto:david.r.lyons@gmail.com)