

Alleluia. Christ is risen. **He is risen indeed. Alleluia.**

We have arrived at the Seventh and last Sunday of the season of Easter. Our gospel stories over these Sundays have consisted of resurrection appearances, the image of Jesus as shepherd, his giving of a new commandment, and making a sick man well. These stories have reflected in different ways Jesus' triumph over death and with today, our celebration of that triumph has been full and complete.

After seven weeks of this celebration, I hope we have "taken it in" - that Jesus' resurrection has taken up residence in our hearts and minds and bodies. For Jesus' resurrection sits at the center of our identity as Christians. It is the ground from which our faith grows. It is the event that reveals to us most fully who God is and what God wants (for you and me and for this world). It is the moment that comes to shape our every moment - indeed, the way we are and live in the world: Our actions and behaviors, our orientation to suffering - including our efforts to end both suffering and the injustices that cause it. In Christ, with fear of death vanquished forever, we are freed to see fully, act fully, and move fully in ways that serve and tend the world (we believe, hope against hope) that God is making anew.

But on this last Sunday of Easter, we receive not a story of healing, not a post resurrection appearance, not an image of Jesus to wrestle with, or a new commandment, but a prayer - Jesus' prayer for his disciples at the last supper as the evening draws to a close. In the gospel, his betrayal and arrest come right on the heels of this passage reading. So, in a way then, with the beginning of this supper way back on Maundy Thursday, all seven weeks of Easter have taken place around this meal. But today that meal ends, and Jesus' presence with us ends - he will be taken away. On this side of the resurrection, death will not take him from us, but his ascension. With his swiftly-coming absence fully in view, with our question as to what it is we'll be left with when he's gone, Jesus prays for us. And we listen.

There is much in this prayer worth time and attention, but I want to lift up for you the three things. Two of them come in verse 25 where Jesus says, “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you.”

First. “I know you.” As with so much of John, we are thrown back with these words to the prologue (the opening) of John’s gospel. The prologue ends with these words. “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” This is the purpose, according to John, that God “became flesh and dwelled among us” in Jesus - to not just bring knowledge of God, but to make God known.

That’s the relationship at the heart of John's gospel. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Remember, that **belief** in John is not about information, it’s about relationship. Jesus revealed this essential quality of who God is and wants to be for us. “I made your name known to them,” he says in this prayer, “that the love with which you have loved me may be in them.” ...?

Second. “Righteous Father, the world does not know you.”

Verse 11 of chapter 17 marks a shift in Jesus' prayer. Speaking of the disciples, he starts, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world.” And “Now they know,” he says. “I am asking on their behalf,” he goes on: For “I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one.” That’s the shift - from “The disciples are ready,” to “protect them” O God. The rest of the prayer up to our verses is about this protection.

The “protection” Jesus is asking for has far less to do with the vulnerability of the disciples than it does with the world they live in, the world where Jesus is soon to leave them. For this is a world in which protection is in short supply. We need look no further than the news to see this truth. The shooting death of 10 people in Buffalo, NY. The shooting death of 21 people (including 19 children) at an elementary school in Uvalde, TX.

This is the world we know. This is the world familiar to Jesus and to the disciples. The protection Jesus is asking for is an earnest plea to God on their behalf, but it’s not “protection from harm” that Jesus is asking for. Indeed, even as he prays, life-ending harm is coming for him. He’s asking God to protect the disciples, not from harm, but from succumbing to the ways of this world.

That succumbing is to fall in step, repeating the well-worn refrain of fracture, of violence, of willful blindness and isolating shame. We hear this chorus in the debates around “gun-control” that flare in the wake of these shootings. We scatter to our camps and draw the dividing lines. Or we ignore the debate all together, making a camp all our own: “It’s not about [gun laws]” said one woman over the news; “It’s about these babies.” This is a world that (in revealing our vulnerability) sends us clawing for our own protection: Whether by guns or by our own truths.

Do I mean by the world? It’s the culture we live in, described unflinchingly by Prentis Hemphill this week. It’s “a culture that worships violence because it is afraid to feel... to be small and vulnerable.” It’s a culture that “passes on | pain, repression and disconnection... where “trauma multiplies” in the absence of “the rituals and pace and concern of the culture [that] will not hold it.”

Holy Father, protect them [from this culture] so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Refusing the fracture that the world draws us toward is not enough. So Jesus prays, "that they may all be one." (This is number 3) That oneness though is not oneness of mind, oneness of agreement. It is something different, something more.

Friday was the wedding anniversary of two friends of mine. Martha and Sam. Martha's a pastor in Minneapolis and I think of Sam as an actor and a woodworker. As a couple, I think of them as invested in drawing out what's hidden - in people, in wood, and in stories.

I went to their wedding eleven years ago. It was one of those experiences that doesn't leave you quite the same. The ceremony included communion, certainly, served by the bride and groom, but it also included foot washing. The presiding pastor started by opening space in the service for Sam and Martha to wash each other's feet. Very sweet. Their families were then invited up to have their feet washed by the couple. How lovely. But imagine it - bride (with hair, dress and bouquet, stooping over a big wooden bowl (carved by her now spouse), and groom, in a full suit, tie flung over his shoulder, washing the feet of their new family. Then the pastor then invited everyone present to come up and have their feet washed by the newly weds. Roughly 300 people I'd guess.

Sam and Martha must have been exhausted by the end. But being in that room, watching this mass of people shuffling up and shuffling back to their seats... And then that moment of individual attention, remembrance and affection over water and bowl... it was all a sheer experience of oneness with this room of strangers - of the union between these people spilling out into and over the community gathered to love-them-together. Did it give me a sense of protection? No, but it gave me a sense of being held - held secure in an outwardly flowing love that both received me and also shaped me (inducting me) into the whole receiving of others.

I imagine the disciples, having had their feet with Jesus' impending departure imminent, that they were feeling this oneness, listening as Jesus prayed on their behalf. The protection Jesus is praying for, is protection of that oneness - a oneness that dissolves division. Not difference, but division. A oneness of shared identity, of common cause, of purpose. It will soon be a oneness of grief, but on this side of the resurrection, perhaps too a oneness in hope.

The world is a hard place to keep hope. But Jesus prays for us today, and he's clear: "I am not asking you to take them out of the world," he says, "but I ask you to protect them." Do you hear that? Jesus is praying not for an insulated oneness that barricades us from the world. The world, this broken and breaking world of hurt, fracture, division, inconsolable grief and brutality, is exactly where Jesus wants us. That they may all be one.

It's here on the brink of Jesus' departure from us, at the end of this Easter season, that our eyes are opened to the oneness Jesus has shared with us, that God has opened to us through Jesus. It is this oneness that shapes for us what lies beyond Jesus' incarnate presence with us. The oneness of Jesus with God is a oneness we've been drawn into, a oneness that spills over the edges of that shared cup and bowl. And this oneness is that to which we must testify, as witnesses, *in this world*.

Jesus leaves us in the world for this reason. But we hear in the words of Revelation today great comfort and great encouragement; words of promise that the world will one day be wrapped in the oneness once prayed for by Christ himself. On that day, The Spirit and the bride will say, "Come." ...everyone who hears will say, "Come" letting all who are thirsty come and take the water of life as pure gift. "For I am the Alpha and the Omega," we hear - "the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

AMEN. Come Lord Jesus. This is an end, but it is also a beginning...