

**Sermon - Easter 7, Year A**  
**John 17 and the High Priestly Prayer**  
**5/21/23**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It has always seemed to me a remarkable thing to imagine Jesus at prayer. He prays often in the Gospels, at times withdrawing to a place apart and sometimes calling out his Father earnestly from among a crowd. Jesus instructs his disciples to pray, giving them the words that so many of us learn by heart: “Our Father, who art in heaven...” Scripture is clear that there are many ways to pray – with our hearts, with our voices, with our bodies, with our lament and our thanksgiving – *and* it is clear that our salvation is bound up with our capacities for communication. We are welcomed into the divine life. We can approach God in our prayer. We can laud and magnify the creator of all heaven and earth, and then...we can talk with him.

But it is an especially lovely thing to imagine Jesus speaking to the Father who shares his very own Being. In the Gospel of John from which our reading is taken today, there is an entire chapter ripe with the prayers of Jesus. John 17 is a famous chapter that has become known as the High Priestly Prayer. The entire chapter is the voice of Jesus. We are hearing, together, one side of a dialogue between two Persons of the Holy Trinity. The Son, praying to the Father. In one sense, it is an ordinary prayer for protection and endurance in the faith, but on the other, it is a wellspring of revelation about the substance of the Trinity itself. Verse 1 through verse 26 is entirely the prayer of Jesus to his Father, and all of it is a prayer for us.

In the Jewish tradition of which Jesus was a part, the role of the priest was understood foundationally as the role of one who intercedes for the people before the altar of God. The priest was the one who offered the sacrifice of an animal or herbs or incense, atoning for the sins and stumblings of the community and asking for God’s blessing on their behalf. Our Christian tradition evolved with this same idea behind much of our liturgy. A priest prays on behalf of the

people. In the First Letter of Peter, we read about all believers inheriting a portion of this priesthood in our faith in Christ - sometimes this is called the “priesthood of all believers” - and here we find the heart of our collective call to intercede for each other. We pray for each other. We help one another when one among us is in need. We are intercessors.

This is what Jesus is doing throughout the entirety of the 17th chapter of John’s Gospel. He is interceding – not merely for his own small cohort of disciples – but for all of humanity. He is being a *priest* for us. He is gathering our need, and our pain, and our hope within his arms and presenting them to God for blessing. He is asking his Father to *remember* us, because we are his and he is ours. “I am asking,” Jesus says, “on their behalf.”

Amidst this eloquent prayer for protection and remembrance, it is striking that Jesus constellates his prayer for us around one particular petition. This prayer is the very moment before Jesus will be betrayed and arrested in the garden across the Kidron Valley. Just a few verses later, Jesus has finished his prayer and will be taken by the authorities in the very first events of his crucifixion and death. This is the very last prayer that Jesus will make as a free man on this side of the Resurrection and what does he pray?: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, **so that they may be one, as we are one.**” In his last moments of peace with the Father. Jesus prays for his followers to be one.

How do we feel this is going today? Thinking about our relationships with one another as human beings – how “unified” are we feeling today? It doesn’t take very much, I don’t think, to see how far from unity we’ve wandered, even – perhaps especially – among us Christians. And all of us are in this mess together. All of us have stumbled here. We can think ourselves to be open-minded, but all of us – certainly me – have some person, some group of people that we would struggle to welcome to our dinner table. Maybe we think we’re just fine with people of different races or different religions, different family structures or different nationalities. But then

there's the difficult family member. The one we don't want to call on their birthday. There's the neighbor with his terrible yard sign. The coworker who votes for the person we cannot stand. The Christians who worship differently. All of us have someone we struggle to see with the eyes of Jesus.

It can seem impossible among such vast divisions to imagine unity. A world around us that seems to thrive on anger and isolation isn't helpful. But there is good news here: unity is not something that we achieve. It is something that God gives us. Jesus prayed for us to be one with one another. God created us to be one with one another. And so there is something in our heart of hearts that recognizes this unity to be where we belong. The anger, the division, the fear – these things cause us to forget what unity looks like, but they do not mean it isn't there. The anger, the division, the fear – these can cloud our hearts and keep us from seeing one another as beloved children of God, but these are like bad weather obscuring a beautiful view of a landscape that truthfully has not changed.

The good news is that God has given us our unity. We do not need to create or achieve it. We simply need to help one another remember that it's already there. We see glimpses of it. We have all been surprised by sharing a laugh or a kind word with a stranger. We travel to distant countries and find that they love their children and serve their meals and rest their heads at the end of the day just like we do. There is something foundational to the human condition that cries out to share our humanity with others – and this is where we start to see the work of God. This is where we see the answers to the prayers of Jesus. This is where the bad weather clears, and we find the beauty of the horizon that has been before us all along.

God has given us to one another. Our savior Christ has spoken on our behalf: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." On earth as it is in heaven. Amen.