

Sermon: The Glory and the Cross

Scripture: John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD

On this last Sunday of the Easter season, we look both backward and forward. We have heard about Jesus' appearances to his disciples; we have gloried in his ascension; we have received hints of the coming of the promised Paraclete. Next week, we will celebrate the birth of the new church, exploding into mission with the gifts of the Spirit. Today, we pause for a moment to hear again the prayer Jesus prayed for his disciples, a prayer we claim as a prayer for us.

There is assurance and certainty in Jesus' prayer. Jesus has made his Father's name known to the disciples. He has given them knowledge of the truth. Now he prays for their protection. Later he will elaborate on the need for the Father's protection: the disciples have been hated by the world, and they are endangered by evil or the evil one (vv. 14-15). Here he asks protection for them for a particular purpose, "so that they may be one, as we are one" (v.11).

For Jesus, life had a climax, and that was the cross. To him, the cross was the glory of life and the way to the glory of eternity. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23). What did Jesus mean when he repeatedly spoke of the cross as his glory and his glorification?

It is one of the facts of history that again and again it was in death that the great ones found their glory. It was when they died, and how they died, which showed people what and who they really were. They may have been misunderstood, undervalued or condemned as criminals in their lives, but their death showed their true place in the scheme of things. Abraham Lincoln had his enemies during his lifetime; but even those who had criticized him saw his greatness when he died. Joan of Arc was burned as a witch and a heretic by the English. One of the secretaries of the King of England left the scene saying: "We are all lost because we have burned a saint". Again and again, a martyr's majesty has appeared in death. It is so with Jesus, for even the centurion at the foot of the cross left saying: "Truly this man was God's Son" (Matthew 27:54).

The cross was the glory of Jesus because he was never more majestic than in his death. The cross was his glory because its magnet drew people to him in a way that even his life had never done – and still it is so today.

Further, the cross was the glory of Jesus because it was the completion of his work. "I have accomplished the work which you gave me to do." For him to have stopped short of the cross would have been to leave his task uncompleted. Jesus had come into this world to tell men and women about the love of God and to show it to them. If he had stopped short of the cross, it would have been to say that God's love said: "Thus far and no further." By going to the cross, Jesus showed that there was nothing that the love of God was not prepared to do and suffer for men and women, that there was literally no limit to it.

LET ME TELL YOU A STORY:

Writer H.L. Gee tells of an incident from the second world war. Attached to one of the Air Raid Precaution Stations in Bristol, there was a boy messenger called Derek Bellfall. He was sent with a message to another station on his bicycle.

On the way back, a bomb mortally wounded him. When they found him, he was still conscious. His last whispered words were: "Messenger Bellfall reporting – I have delivered the message."

A famous painting from the first world war showed an engineer fixing a field telephone line. He had just completed the line so that an essential message might come through, when he was shot. The picture shows him in the moment of death, and beneath it there is one word, "Through!" He had given his life, that the message might get through.

That is exactly what Jesus did. He completed his task; he brought God's love to men and women. For him that meant the cross; and the cross was his glory because he finished the work God gave him to do; he made people forever certain of God's love

There is another question – how did the cross glorify God? The only way to glorify God is to obey him. Children bring honor to their parents when they bring them obedience. Citizens bring honor to their country when they obey it. Scholars bring honor to their teacher when they obey what they have been taught.

Jesus brought glory and honor to God by his perfect obedience to him. The gospel story makes it quite clear that Jesus could have escaped the cross. Humanly speaking, he could have turned back and need never have gone to Jerusalem. As we look at Jesus in the last days, we are bound to say; "See how he loved God! See to what lengths his obedience would go!" He glorified God on the cross by rendering the perfect obedience of perfect love. Jesus prayed to God to glorify him and to glorify himself. The cross was not the end. There was the resurrection to follow. This was the vindication of Jesus. It was the proof that human beings could do their worst and that Jesus could still triumph. It was as if God pointed at the cross and said, "That is what human beings think of my Son." And then pointed at the resurrection and said, "That is what I think of my Son." The cross was the worst that could be done to Jesus; but not even that could conquer him. The glory of the resurrection obliterated the shame of the cross. For Jesus, the cross was the way back. "Glorify me" he prayed, with the glory which I had before the world began. Jesus came from God and returned to him. The exploit between his coming forth and his going back was the cross. For him, therefore, it was the gateway to glory; and if he had refused to pass through it, there would have been no glory for him to enter into. For Jesus, the cross was his return to God.

Think about the way John's gospel starts; "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." From the very first verse, John struggles to express the mystery of Jesus – that he was God and distinct from God at the same time. We look at Jesus and say, "That is what God looks like." When Jesus prays that his followers may be one as he and the father are one, he is praying all of us into this mystery too. Not just that we shall each become one with God, or one with Christ, but that we should become one with each other in the way Jesus and the Father are one. In some ways, the first part of that mystery is the easy part. We all have our own ways to grow in our oneness with God. We may ground our own growth in corporate worship. We may follow a spiritual discipline of private prayer, study, and service in God's name. We may dedicate ourselves to a particular ministry in a cause of justice, or healing, or pastoral presence.

No matter which path we follow toward oneness with God, the Holy Spirit can act in our lives to draw us closer, and to reveal to us the presence of God that is already nearer to us than our own heartbeats. We have only to open our eyes and our ears and remain willing to receive and respond. Jesus is also praying that his followers may be one with one another. There, of course, is where the pain lies for us today. It would appear that *disunity* is the defining notion in the church of ours, in this church of Jesus Christ. We have our denominations and our subdenominations. We argue over who can be ordained and what words we can use when we pray. We argue over our alliances with this or that group around the world, or within our parish community. We

argue over how our churches participate in secular life, or how religion interacts with the state. It causes enormous pain. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that it is also nothing new.

When there were still people walking the streets who had known Jesus face to face, the Christian community was arguing. They argued over who could share a meal. They argued over whose party represented the real church.

They argued over whether you were really a Christian if you did not exhibit certain spiritual gifts. So, we may wonder whether all this contention, in the past and in the present, means that Jesus' prayer has never been answered. That option does not seem satisfactory. Have we found it encouraging to hear once again how Jesus prayed for his disciples and for us? Do we trust that God does hear prayers and does answer them? Do we also trust that God heard Jesus' prayer that we all might be one? If we do, then our problem may be with our own assumptions of what unity is. We may need to think differently somehow, when we think about Christians "Being one".

Jesus prayed "that they may be one, as we are one" (17:11). "The word was with God, and the word was God" (1:1). Some ancient theologians who studied these verses talked about Jesus' oneness with the Father in terms that suggest movement – a kind of interweaving or dance among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. What if the answer to Jesus' prayer for unity was not about solidifying into a monolithic block but rather was about joyful interplay, glorious dancing?

If we tried that idea on for a while, could it affect how we view our own disagreements with our brothers and sisters? Perhaps the vision toward which we strive is not one of total agreement but of the ability to join in distinct ways, in the common Dance of faith.

It is just possible that this is what Christian unity looks like – a body, as Paul said, with many parts, a dance with many dancers, a song with many voices. The challenge to us, in response to all this variety, is to say yes. Yes, those other people really are Christians too. Yes, there is pain in all this diversity, but there is also possibility. Yes, there is struggle, but there is also glory.

Do we find all this movement, all this action, disorienting? Does our anxiety about conflict lure us into wishing for something less dramatic? This Christian community of ours can be wild and frustrating and crazy, but we place our trust in that prayer of Jesus. The disciples Jesus loved, and the community he loves now, lived and live – enveloped by that prayer.

CLOSING PRAYER:

O God, your Son, Jesus, prayed for his disciples, and sent them into the world to proclaim the coming of your kingdom. By your Holy Spirit, hold the church in unity, and keep it faithful to your word, so that, breaking bread together, we may be one with Christ in faith and love and service, now and forever.
AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

Jesus had two things – belief in God and belief in humanity. It is one of the most uplifting things in the world to think that Jesus put his trust in people like ourselves. We too must never be daunted by human weakness or by the small beginning. We too must go forward with confident belief in God and in one another. Then we will never be pessimist, because with these two beliefs the possibilities of life are infinite. GO IN PEACE!