

## Gospel - John 17: 6-19

### Easter 6

Sermon 5.16.21

Cathy Warner



Today's gospel reading takes place on Jesus' last night with his disciples. After washing their feet, he has spoken to them about what is to come, for him, and for them, and we have heard some of these words in recent Sundays in Jesus' metaphor of the true vine and branches and his commandment to love one another as he has loved them.

In John's gospel, 7 chapters are devoted to Jesus with his disciples in the Upper Room. Knowing that his time with them is swiftly drawing to a close, Jesus has done everything he can to prepare his disciples to live without him. And after he has said and done all that, he turns to the one who sent him and prays for his dearest friends, those he has travelled with, those who have borne witness to his ministry, those who will somehow carry on his name, those who have become his family.

This prayer is different from the prayer he gave his disciples when they asked them how to pray. This prayer is less linear. It moves back and forth over the same themes, like a poem or tapestry, with words or stitches repeated with subtle changes that add texture and nuance to the meaning.

Let's listen to some of these themes . . .

#### **Jesus utters words of giving and receiving:**

*you gave them to me  
everything you have given me  
the words that you gave to me I have given to them  
on behalf of those whom you gave me  
I have given them your word,  
they have received them*

#### **Jesus speaks of being sent:**

*they have believed that you sent me  
I am coming to you  
now I am coming to you  
As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world*

#### **He speaks of being glorified, and sanctified:**

*and I have been glorified in them*

*Sanctify them in the truth*

*for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth*

**He speaks of protection:**

*protect them in your name*

*I protected them in your name*

*I guarded them*

*protect them from the evil one*

**And of the world:**

*I am not asking on behalf of the world*

*now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world,*

*I speak these things in the world*

*the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world*

*I am not asking you to take them out of the world*

*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*

**And He speaks of belonging:**

*They were yours*

*that they may be one, as we are one*

*All mine are yours, and yours are mine*

Jesus' prayer comes after his last supper with his friends, after he has said much to them, and before they leave the house for the garden where he'll be arrested. Here, he turns his heart and mind inward to pray. Our reading drops into the prayer after the 5<sup>th</sup> verse, and the prayer continues through verse 25. The verse that follows our reading, the 20<sup>th</sup>, offers important context for us. Jesus continues with these words:

*"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one."*

Jesus prays for those beyond the circle gathered around him. He prays for those who will believe in him through his disciples' word. That is every single person who has come to believe in Christ after his death. That's two thousand years and millions of people. That is you and me. Jesus prays for us. Jesus asks all these things on our behalf. He wants protection and unity for all people. He wants us to receive and give God's gifts and to spread God's truth into the world. This is not a small private prayer; this is an expansive all-encompassing prayer.

Even with the threat of death looming, Jesus doesn't allow fear or anxiety to turn his focus inward, as it would for many of us. He focus on caring for those he loves. His words and actions model for us how to stay present and grounded in the reality of God when the powers of the world have an agenda that seeks to squelch and silence God's truth. Jesus models for us how to stay present to and aware of those who look to us,

even while we struggle with our own pain, fear, and doubt. He models for us how to do what is in our power, and how to turn to God in trust for so much of life that is beyond our control. He shows us how to love well and how to say goodbye in a way that honors life even in the midst of grief.

His prayer reminds us that though we do not belong to the world we are in the world—For better or worse. “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,” John tells us in 3:16. God loves this planet and all of creation. The mountains, valleys, seas, and deserts, and creatures that inhabit these places.

And God sent Jesus, who in turn sent his disciples, who in turn sent us, into this beautiful and broken world. A world corrupted by human sin and greed, by ignorance and apathy. A world that yearns for peace and groans for justice. A world that sustains all life, that still shimmers with kindness and love. To be alive is to be fully immersed in this world. Breathing its air, eating its food, creating new life, transforming the resources offered up by the good earth, exchanging goods and services, developing cultures and societies, and endeavoring to live peacefully with our neighbors.

There is no denying our physicality and the suffering and death that are an inevitable part of the human experience. And yet, our true identities are not based on worldly measures: social security numbers, credit scores, property deeds, or retirement benefits. Our true identities aren't tied to diseases or diagnoses. Our true worth is not measured in W-2s, job titles, degrees awarded, trophies on shelves, plaques on our walls, the number of children or grandchildren we have, mountains climbed, illnesses survived, church committees chaired, or pious acts performed.

Our identities and our worth are determined by only this: The fact that we belong to God. The fact that we belong to Jesus. And in those facts, the undeniable reality that we belong to each other.

“You belong to God. You are beloved. You matter.” These are the words we are called to speak in this world. These are the words of hope and comfort we can offer to those we befriend easily, and those we find difficult, those riddled with hopelessness and despair, those who are “failing” by the standards of the world, those forlorn and forgotten, those caught in the grip of systemic poverty and injustice, those crippled by racism, sexism, and the many -isms that constrain our spirits, those who seem to “have it all” in celebrity or success, yet feel nothing but hollow.

Jesus' prayer sends those he prays for straight into the world where we can give each other his truth. And that's not easy for those of us who doubt our own voices, or fear conflict, or are introverts. And it's not easy for any of us who've been sequestered in this COVID year and don't feel comfortable having these conversations electronically.

May we receive the gift of this prayer and may it empower us. As we embrace the gift of this prayer, may we carry Jesus' wish for our protection and assurance of our belonging close to our hearts. And wherever we are sent, let us send these words, too so that all might receive their reassurance and promise. When the needs and demands of living in this world threaten to overwhelm us, we need only to remember that God is the foundation of the world and the very center of our being. Our true home as we live in this world but are not fully of it.

In his prayer Jesus say to the holy one who sent him, “now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they [meaning his followers, meaning us] may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

**May our joy truly be complete in Christ’s indwelling presence.**