

Easter 7A 2017 Sermon

John 17:1-11

Jesus 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 own 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."

Rather than a sermon today, I'd like to offer some reflections on portions of today's Gospel – a verse here, and a verse there. There's just too much going on in this Gospel passage to extract an over-all theme; and the metaphorical and circular language, the cross-references to other parts of John's Gospel, as well as some cultural background issues, take a lot of unpacking.¹

Now, the past 2 Sundays, we have heard from Jesus' long farewell speech in John's Gospel (John 14-16). Knowing that he will soon be leaving them (the very next day he will pour out his life on the cross), Jesus takes this time after his Last Supper with his disciples to instruct them regarding the meaning of what is about to happen, and how to carry on after he is gone.

In *today's* Gospel, that **instruction** has ended, and Jesus looks up to heaven and prays to his heavenly Father. And we get to eavesdrop, as it were, on Jesus' intimate prayer with his Father.

I'll start with the end – with the very last line of today's Gospel passage. Jesus prays that his followers be one, just as he and his heavenly Father are one. Jesus' desire that we followers of his be **one** is a major theme in this last chapter of his Farewell Address. And yet in **our** lives *today*, in our **world** today, rather than growing in oneness and unity, we seem to be growing further and further apart – even those of us who profess to being Christians. Sociologists, Christian news outlets, and secular news analysts of **all** stripes have noted the increasing polarization of our society, to the point where we can't hear each other or speak

civilly to one another, and don't even pretend to *want* to. My friends, we HAVE to know how totally *contrary* this is to Jesus' teaching and his fervent prayer for us, on the eve of his death – his fervent prayer that we be **one!** (in addition, see John 17:22-23) If we claim to be followers of Jesus, we must make every effort to *narrow* our divisions, to close the gap that exists between us. If our hearts were truly open to God's Spirit, to the mind of Christ, we could not think and act in the dualistic manner that is so prevalent in our world today. The fact that we maintain and even widen divisions and polarization is a clear sign that we **don't** have the mind of Christ, and **don't** have the unifying Spirit of God flowing through our souls.

A second observation: In today's passage, Jesus tells his heavenly Father, "you have given [your Son] authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him." So that is the **purpose** of Jesus' authority: *to give eternal life*. And what **is** eternal life? Jesus answers in the very next sentence: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." But when Jesus talks about "knowing" God and Jesus Christ, he is not talking about being *familiar with* the Bible and knowing a bit about Jesus' biography. All too often, Christians have said such things as, "If you don't *know* Jesus, you won't go to heaven." A homeless friend of mine, an army veteran who feels called to minister to other homeless vets here in Canon City, will sometimes tell me how one of these homeless vets whom he has evangelized has "come to know Jesus." And who knows? Maybe that person's life truly **has** been deeply transformed in God's Spirit and in the mind of Christ. But all too often, I'm afraid, "coming to know Jesus" translates into "becoming a member of Jesus' tribe," with a tribal mentality that pits **Jesus'** tribe (or my particular *subset* of Jesus' tribe) against other "tribes" (those who are different from us).

But when Jesus speaks in today's passage about "knowing" God and Jesus Christ whom God sent, he has in mind a different, and far deeper, meaning. Jesus was a Jew, and in the Jewish language, the word "to know" connotes intimate relationship. When the book of Genesis says, "Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived..." "knowing" refers to the intimate act of sexual intercourse. (Genesis 4:1) But "knowing" in the Old Testament doesn't *have* to imply physical sex. Take, for example, a person who has suffered for years with severe arthritis or neuropathy or migraine headaches. That person can honestly say, "I **know** pain." In saying that, the person means that they have *experienced* pain for so long that they have, as it were, an intimate relationship with pain. **THIS** is the kind of "knowing" Jesus is referring to when he says, "this is eternal life, that they may **know** you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." "Knowing" God means *experiencing* God intimately, having the mind of Christ, participating in the flow of divine love shared within the Holy Trinity. And **this knowing**, Jesus says, **IS** eternal life.

Next, a word about "glory," which is used in some form six times in our passage. "Glory" is not a word we use much in everyday speech, and when we do (as when

we say “Michael Phelps achieved Olympic glory”) it describes something very different from the way Jesus uses the word. When Jesus prays to his Father, “glorify your Son,” he is not looking for gold medals or trophies. What, then, DOES Jesus mean when he asks God to glorify him? Fr. John Shea refers back to Chapter 12 in John’s Gospel, the lead-up to the Farewell address, where Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32) “**This** is the glory that Jesus prays for,” Fr. Shea writes. “He wants to become a magnet drawing all people to himself. But this desire for centrality is not to extol himself or seek individual fame. People come to the Son only to receive the life of the Father. So the spiritual mutuality is in place: God glorifies the Son by attracting people to him, and, in turn, the Son glorifies the Father by communicating divine life to the people attracted to him...”² This was the very purpose for which Jesus was sent into the world. As he said earlier in John’s Gospel, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (10:10) Fr. Shea notes, “Jesus has glorified the Father by finishing the work he was sent to do. This work was to communicate divine life into creation and, in doing so, reconnect [creation] to the creator.”³ Only in *John’s* Gospel does Jesus breathe his last breath on the cross and say, “It is finished.” (John 19:30) The work God sent Jesus to accomplish – communicating divine life into creation and, in doing so, reconnecting creation to the creator – is finished (at least **Jesus’** part of it).

Finally, Jesus says to his heavenly Father, “**I** have been glorified in [those whom you gave me].” How do Jesus’ followers – his original 12 disciples as well as you and I – how do we glorify Jesus? There are many contemporary Christian songs that speak of “glorifying Jesus’ name.” But what does that mean? To sing songs of praise to Jesus?

John Shea writes: “As the Father has been glorified in Jesus because Jesus made available divine life to creation, so Jesus is glorified by those who came to him and accepted and understood his words. More precisely, their acceptance and understanding enabled them to pass on to *others* the life that **Jesus** had passed on to *them*. This ability of [us] followers of Jesus is important. Jesus is going to the Father, and so will not be available in incarnate form. But those [of us] who belong to the Father and the Son are still in the world, continuing to carry out the mission of the Father and the Son’s love. Since this is a mission to develop a new human community, [we] will witness to it when [we] are one as the Father and Son are one.”⁴

Which brings us back to where we started: it is **our** mission to glorify Jesus by passing on to others the divine life and love that Jesus passed on to us from his Father. And in doing so, we create a community of people who are “one in the Spirit,” *united* one to another because we have all entered into the flow of divine life and love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is what it means to **know** the Father and Jesus Christ; and in such knowing, we are made one. As the song says,

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored ⁵

AMEN

- 1 Especially helpful in putting Jesus' language into its original context is *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, pp. 243-248. Understanding the "Patron/Broker/Client" system of the First Century Mediterranean society puts Jesus' language about "giving" and "sending" in a much more understandable context.
- 2 John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 192
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 193
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 194
- 5 "They'll know we are Christians by our love," 1968: Peter Scholtes