

## Easter 7A 2020 Sermon

May 24, 2020

### **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."*

In the city of Rome, there stands a stone monument called *The Arch of Titus*. It was built in the year 81 A.D. to commemorate the Roman Emperor Titus' deification. You see, after a Roman emperor's death, the Roman Senate, if it deemed that emperor worthy, could vote to elevate that deceased emperor to the status of a god – equal to Zeus, Athena, etc. What made Titus worthy of deification? He led the Roman army to utterly destroy Jerusalem and its Temple in the year 70 A.D. Carved prominently into the stone Arch of Titus is a scene of the triumphant Roman soldiers carrying some of the spoils from the destruction of the sacred Jewish temple, including the golden menorah and the Gold Trumpets. The arch glorifies the deified Emperor Titus.

In our Gospel today, on the night before he will be crucified, Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven and prays, "Father, the hour has come; **glorify** your Son so that the Son may glorify you." In the supreme irony of a Gospel which *revels* in irony, Jesus' "glorification" will reach its climax with the hour of his betrayal and crucifixion. **His** glory is *not* manifested by being seated on a golden throne wearing a golden crown and expensive clothing, wielding earthly power. **His** glory is manifested in being nailed to a cross, naked, beaten, and bleeding,

wearing only a crown of thorns. And the Christian Church quickly came to realize that this truly *was* glorification, in the sense that Jesus' willing death on the cross manifests supremely the identity and glory of a God who *is* vulnerable, sacrificial, forgiving love.

It is, to be sure, a *peculiar* type of glory – a kind of glory which is *opposite* to that which human society has long recognized. Whereas Titus killed and destroyed and was rewarded for that by being made a god, Jesus, who was *already* God, showed the glory of God by emptying himself, taking human form, identifying completely with us, and willingly submitting himself to mockery, torture, and the worst kind of death imaginable. St. Paul wrote, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him...” (Philippians 2:5-9, NRSV)

Paul tells us that **we** are to have that same self-emptying mindset in **us** that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 2:5) That is *our* glory, too!

And yet, you and I, followers of Christ today, can **still** fall prey to *this* world's understanding of glory. Like those Romans in the days of Titus, and like “successful” and triumphant people down through history, *we* tend “to identify glory with strength, with victory, with triumph and success and adulation, rather than with Christ's servanthood, suffering, [self-sacrifice] and vulnerability.”<sup>1</sup>

My friends, we have **seen**, over these past months, this very kind of Christ-like servanthood and self-sacrifice for the sake of others, for the sake of all. We have seen it in the front-line health care workers and other “essential” workers who have willingly been putting themselves in positions of extreme vulnerability and danger. Health care workers using their skills to heal and save those stricken by this new, unpredictable, potentially deadly or permanently debilitating virus. Some of these health care workers have died. Some have survived, but with permanent lung damage, or strokes, or heart attacks, or loss of a limb, or other organ damage. Some of them have,

despite all precautions, picked up the virus from their sick patients and unwittingly infected their own loved ones and families.

And yet, not only did health care workers in such hot spots as New York City *willingly* put themselves on the line for the sake of the sick and for the sake of our world as a whole; *some* health care workers even travelled across the country to **go** to these hot spots, *knowing* the danger to their own lives, and yet **wanting** to go. *Why?* To make themselves feel like, or to be seen as, heroes? Perhaps there was *some* of this kind of “I’ll save the day!” thinking. But I *have* to believe that in the vast majority of cases, it was far deeper than that.

I *have* to believe that in the vast majority of cases, these health care workers were motivated **not** by ego or wanting “glory” for themselves, but by the love of Christ within them, and by being able to **see** Christ in those whom they worked – and continue to work – so desperately to save. Next Sunday, when we renew our baptismal vows, we will be asked, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” And we will respond, “I will, with God’s help.”<sup>2</sup> The health care workers who have been putting their lives on the line have been able to see in their patients the common humanity which we all share. They have been living answers to Jesus’ final prayer in today’s Gospel, “that they may be one,” even as Jesus and the Father are one.

A few chapters earlier in John’s Gospel, after the Last Supper, Jesus said to his disciples (and to us), “A new commandment I give you: that you love one another: **just** as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” (13:34) These health care workers have been putting flesh and bones on that commandment which Jesus has given us.

But now, after some 3 months of this pandemic, it seems like our collective focus is no longer on these selfless “frontline” workers. It seems to have shifted to “re-opening” the economy, re-opening businesses, re-opening churches. And, in a way, that is appropriate. But it seems to me, and I hope I’m wrong, that the overwhelming gratitude that everyone in our nation had for the self-giving sacrifices of health care workers is being replaced by an attitude that might be described as an “It’s my right!” attitude. It’s my right to go back to

the way I used to live. It's my right not to have to wear a mask. It's my right to do what I want. It was reported on Thursday that a Kentucky convenience store put up a sign reading: "NO Face Masks allowed in store. Lower your mask or go somewhere else. Stop listening to [our Governor] ... he's a dumbass."<sup>3</sup>

Now, each of us has probably heard 100 times that wearing a mask doesn't really protect *me*; it protects those with whom I come in contact. I'm not sure whether the owner of that Kentucky convenience store considers himself a Christian or not. But, as our Bishop and many other Christian leaders have pointed out, wearing a mask is an act of loving our neighbor. So, why would anyone **not** want to protect, if at all possible, one's neighbor? "Love your neighbor as yourself," is one of the 2 Great Commandments of Jesus. (Mark 12:30-31) And you have heard me say before that another way of translating that is, "Love your neighbor who is as yourself," or "Love your neighbor who is yourself." I and my neighbor are one. In today's Gospel, Jesus prays for this very thing: "Holy Father," he prays, "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." On the night before he is to be crucified, Jesus prays that we be one – not divided against one another! When we are living a life of genuinely loving our neighbor as ourself; when we are living a life in unity with God and one another, **then** we are glorifying Christ. In the Catechism at the back of our Prayer Book, we read, "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." (BCP p. 855) The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. In doing this, we glorify Jesus, who prayed that we be one.

My friends, can **we** pray for this, also? Pray that we might continue to follow the examples of those frontline healthcare workers? How in the world can we praise their selfless, healing, community-building sacrifices on the one hand, while on the other hand we ourselves are making this admittedly complicated and difficult process of re-opening into a divisive, political issue? How can Christians speak of "My rights!" when Christ, whose name and mind we are to have, did not claim rights for himself – even his right to being equal with God? His right not to be condemned and crucified unjustly?

St. Paul says we are to have the mind of Christ. That is what Jesus means when he prays, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me...” One’s name is one’s identity, one’s character and characteristics, one’s mindset and attitude. Jesus prays that **we** be protected in **his** mindset, **his** character, **his** values, his very *being* – that we might become one with him and with one another.

Our President has just proclaimed that churches and other houses of worship are essential. I agree – with a clarification. The Church **is** essential. And throughout this time of pandemic, the Church has been alive, praying, giving, ministering, calling, meeting online, and caring for one another. The Church has never closed. Our *buildings* have, to be sure; but we have proven these past two months that what we have always professed is true: the Church is **not** the building. And if we rush back into our buildings without caring for the safety of our vulnerable members, we cease being the Church.

My friends, re-opening our church buildings for in-person worship is NOT a political issue. Re-opening our church buildings for in-person worship is NOT a political issue. Let us not listen to those who want to *make* it so, to *make* it political and divisive. Let’s listen, instead, to Jesus, and imitate his example, and join in his life, his eternal life. **His** glory was to *empty* himself of his divine rights and enter fully into our humanity, there to heal, reconcile, restore the outcast and tend to the vulnerable. And when we live into **his** name, **his** character, **his** compassion, **his** being, **his** eternal life, **we become his** glory.

AMEN

1 David Lose, “A Peculiar Glory,” [http://www.davidlose.net/2020/05/easter-7-a-a-peculiar-glory/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29](http://www.davidlose.net/2020/05/easter-7-a-a-peculiar-glory/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+davidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29)

2 *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 305

3 “No masks allowed: stores turn customers away in US culture war,” *The Guardian*, May 22

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/22/us-stores-against-face-masks>