

Easter 7, Year B

May 17, 2015

John 17: 6 - 19

[Jesus lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed to his Father:] "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. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and 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, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

(Much of this sermon is taken from a commentary by John Shea¹)

Our Gospel scene opens upon Jesus and his disciples immediately following the Last Supper. They are still in the Upper Room. Jesus has finished washing his disciples' feet; they have not yet left to go to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus has just given his long farewell address to his disciples, and now he looks upwards in prayer to his Heavenly Father.

Now, whenever John's Gospel tells us that Jesus looks up to heaven, we must understand that something more is happening than simply his eyeballs lifting toward the sky; John wants us to understand that Jesus' mind, heart, and consciousness are now keenly at one with God. One commentator states: "Looking to heaven' [means]... an appreciation of the earth from heaven's perspective. It [is a perspective which] sees, hears, smells, touches, and tastes the earth as a creation sustained and transformed by its Source and Destiny." (Shea, p. 138) That's the stance from which Jesus prays: he sees, hears, smells, touches, and tastes the earth as a creation sustained and transformed by its Source and Destiny.

Most of us, I think, believe that when we pray, we stand here on earth and send up our petitions to God in heaven – or wherever it is that God is located. We want God, who is "over there", to act favorably toward us, who are "right here".

But Jesus, especially in John's Gospel, doesn't pray that way. When Jesus prays, he places himself in God's consciousness, God's mindset, God's heart; places himself in heaven, so to speak, at one with his Father, and prays for the world *from there*. Fr. John Shea writes that

“Jesus always knew that God answered him because he spoke *divine* words **from** God’s heart and not *human* words **to** God’s ears. He was not pleading; he was revealing.” (p. 142) Jesus spoke *divine* words **from** God’s heart and not *human* words **to** God’s ears. Prayer **not** as words emanating from us *to* God, but from us *in* God – and that is a crucial distinction. When we pray, we are to “lift up our hearts”, as we do in our Eucharistic Prayer; lift up our hearts, unite *our* spirits with *God’s* spirit, and view our world from the perspective of heaven. Then pray for the world from that place.

What does the world look like from the perspective of heaven?

From heaven’s perspective, the earth and all that is in it is the creation of a divine, life-giving love which suffuses all things, continues to indwell all things. Those who were receptive to Jesus during his earthly ministry, like his disciples, recognized in Jesus, at some level of their being, the presence of this generative love which formed their very selves. When Jesus, after a rough spot in his ministry, asks his disciples if they want to leave him, Peter speaks for them all when he answers, “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life.” (John 6:68) Peter and the other disciples may not *understand* Jesus all the time (nor do we!), but they *recognize* at the core of his being that primal generative love which created and sustains them. It is what draws them to Jesus in the first place, and keeps them coming back. “The glue between Jesus and his disciples,” writes Fr. Shea, “has always been the revelation of this divine love, a divine love that created all things and has become flesh in Jesus. But now... [in today’s Gospel reading] Jesus is returning to the Father. The great fear [for the disciples] is that the loss of Jesus will mean the loss of the revelation [of divine love]. Jesus was the mediator; and without the mediator how will the disciples and the Father remain in touch?”

And so, Jesus’ prayer in today’s Gospel addresses that fear, which is not without basis. For we live in a world surrounded by a darkened consciousness which only knows how things are separate from one another. The dominant mindset in our world is dualistic, either/or, yours-against-mine, judgmental, ego-centered. (Just look at the political arena if you need proof.) Fr. Shea writes: “This darkened consciousness does not know the [divine,] generative love that sustains all things and unites all things. The world’s darkened consciousness therefore creates all sorts of [divisions,] violence and hatred. In fact, it has a *particular* animosity against those who know and live out the revelation of divine love. Their light threatens the darkness; and although the darkness cannot overcome the light, it never tires of trying. In this situation the Father and the disciples must stay exceptionally close. The competing consciousness of separation and violence is an active agent of evil. Only a stronger consciousness of divine love will protect the disciples.”

Only a stronger consciousness of divine love will protect the disciples.

And only a stronger consciousness of divine love will protect **us**. That is crucial to note, for there is a danger that when we read Jesus’ prayer that his disciples be “protected” we misunderstand what he means by “protect”. For when **we** use that word, we usually mean it in the sense of *defending* some part of our ego identity; and nothing could be farther from Jesus’ mind. Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault notes what this human tendency of self-protection does to our awareness of God’s true nature, which is a nature of abundance. “Abundance

surrounds and sustains us like the air we breathe,” she writes; “it is only our habitual **self**-protectiveness that prevents us from perceiving it.”² Bourgeault says that such **self**-protectiveness – defending, hoarding, accumulating, clinging, etc. – is exactly what makes us spiritually blind to the abundance of God’s generative love constantly flowing into creation. In order to see clearly, to see from God’s perspective, to remain in the consciousness of this abundant love, we have to do the very *opposite* of **self**-protection and *die* to self, empty ourselves of our ego defenses, let go of our life that we might gain it.

No; the kind of protection Jesus prays for his disciples isn’t protection from death, but rather protection from a darkened, worldly consciousness that sees everything from the perspective of ego, division, either/or, yours-against-mine separateness. Only a *stronger* consciousness of divine love will protect the disciples – and us – from that.

And *from* that stronger consciousness, centered in the indwelling unity of the Father and the Son, comes the ability to transform the world’s darkened consciousness. From a consciousness centered in divine, generative love emanates our mission in the world. For like Jesus, we, too are called to reveal, communicate, and pass on divine, generative love to all whom we meet. As God sent Jesus into the world, so he sends us. Now that Jesus is no longer physically here, we are to be the body of Christ in our world.

May we carry on his mission, revealing to a darkened world that the fundamental structure of reality is the continual flow of divine love into creation.

AMEN

¹John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN, 2005: Liturgical Press, pp. 137-142

²“Mystical Experience or Unitive Seeing?” Article by Cynthia Bourgeault, December 20th, 2009, www.spiritualpaths.net