

## Easter 7B 2018 Sermon

May 13, 2018

*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.*

It has been named one of the “7 Wonders of the Medieval World.” Built in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century in the city of Constantinople (modern day Istanbul), the Church of Hagia Sophia was different – in architecture, size, and beauty – from any church ever before seen. In the year 987 A.D., St. Vladimir of Kiev sent emissaries to Constantinople to see the church, and they described their experience in this way: “We knew not whether we were in heaven or on the earth. For on the earth there *is* no such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men...”<sup>1</sup>

Scholars today believe that the experience of the beauty of the Eucharist within the heavenly church of Hagia Sophia caused a paradigm shift in the Christian understanding of that part of the Eucharist in which the priest calls the worshippers to “Lift up your hearts!” One scholar writes, “To lift up one’s heart in this massive edifice... was... to be in what many would consider [heaven]...”

<sup>2</sup> To “lift up your hearts” in the Eucharist is to suspend space and time for the duration of Eucharist, and enter into the realm of heaven itself.

Many of you have heard me describe the procession at the beginning of our Eucharist as an outward and visible sign of our hearts and spirits entering into a

heavenly realm where time and space are suspended, and together we draw nearer into the presence of God.

A similar phenomenon is happening in today's Gospel passage.

The setting is immediately following the Last Supper. 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 should understand that something *more* is happening than simply his eyeballs shifting upward. "Looking up to heaven" means that Jesus' mind, heart, and consciousness are lifted into that spiritual realm where he is now profoundly at one with God. If lifting up one's heart in the Eucharist is to enter into heaven, for the Gospel writer John, *Jesus'* lifting his eyes to heaven was a way of saying that *Jesus* was entering into the heavenly sphere. And it is *from within this heavenly space* that Jesus prays for his disciples.<sup>3</sup>

Now, most of us think that when we pray, *we* stand here on earth and send up our petitions to *God* in heaven. We want God, who is "up there," to act favorably toward us, who are "down here."

But Jesus, *especially* in John's Gospel, doesn't pray that way. In today's Gospel passage, when Jesus prays, not only is he lifting up his *eyes*, he is lifting up his **heart** to heaven, placing himself in God's consciousness, God's mindset, God's heart, and praying for his disciples *from that place*. Fr. John Shea writes, "Jesus always knew that God answered him because he spoke *divine* words **from** God's heart and not *human* words **to** God's ears."<sup>4</sup> He spoke *divine* words **from** God's heart and not *human* words **to** God's ears.

And this, I think, can help us understand how *we* can pray in a different way. Perhaps prayer is **not** about words emanating from *us* down here *to* God up there, but rather it is about lifting up our hearts and entering, for the moment, into heaven itself, uniting *our* spirits with *God's* spirit, viewing our world from the perspective of heaven, and *then* offering our petitions, intercessions, and thanksgivings **from** that space.

20<sup>th</sup>-Century Episcopal author Agnes Sanford wrote, "we [should] begin our prayer not by clamoring for this and that before we have even reached [God's] presence... Few of us would begin shouting to a friend whom we wish to visit while still six blocks down the street."<sup>5</sup> Rather, we would take the time to walk the six blocks to come near to our friend, and *then* have the conversation. The same is true with our praying to God. We often think of something we want from God and immediately "send up" our prayer, without first moving our hearts into the closer presence of God (as Jesus does when he "lifts his eyes to heaven.") We tend to shout out our prayer to God while we are still 6 blocks away! We "speak

human words *to* God's ears," rather than "divine words *from* God's heart." What would happen if we, like Jesus, were to first "lift our eyes to heaven," "lift up our hearts," spiritually walk the 6 blocks to enter into the closer presence of God, and *then* offer our prayers from that divine space?

*One* of the things that would happen is that we would see the world differently from that heavenly space. In the words of Fr. Shea, we would have "an appreciation of the earth from heaven's perspective... [a perspective which] sees, hears, smells, touches, and tastes the earth as a creation sustained and transformed by" divine love.<sup>6</sup>

But as we all know, such a perspective is not easy to maintain – and *that* is one of the subjects of Jesus' prayer in today's Gospel. Jesus is about to leave his disciples. While he was with them, he "protected them in his Father's name" – which is to say, he grounded them in God, being a constant source and reminder for re-centering them in God's spirit, God's closer presence. When he is no longer physically with them, what will keep them from the ever-tempting influences and lures of this world? The kind of divisiveness, selfishness, pride, judgment of others, and lack of compassion and forgiveness that surrounds us on this earthly sphere? Fr. Shea writes, "[The disciples] are *in* the world, surrounded by darkened consciousness... [which] only knows how things **are** separate from one another. It does *not* know the generative love that sustains all things. ...In this [darkened] situation the Father and the disciples must stay exceptionally close [after Jesus' departure]. The competing consciousness of separation and violence is an active agent of evil. Only a *stronger* consciousness of divine love will protect the disciples."<sup>7</sup> This is what Jesus prays for.

It is important to note that the end goal of Jesus' prayer is not the disciples' *physical* protection. If it were, then Jesus' prayer is a total failure, for history and legend tell us that 11 of the 12 disciples are eventually put to death for their faith. No. Jesus' prayer is clearly for their *spiritual* protection, for the express purpose of their being *sent out* into the world to spread and share God's truth and love. "Sanctify them in the truth," Jesus prays; or as the Today's English translation puts it, "Dedicate them to yourself by means of the truth..."<sup>8</sup> Their spiritual protection and dedication to God is for the purpose of spreading God's truth and love. John Shea puts it this way: Their "sanctification will unfold into the energy of mission..."

"The disciples are to become the body of Christ in the world when the body of Jesus is no longer physically available. When this happens, Jesus' joy (generated by his oneness with the Father and his mission in the world) may become full in the disciples who are one with the Father and Jesus and *sent* on mission into the world. This prayer of Jesus is a passionate plea that the purposes of eternal generative love may be served in the perpetually perishing affairs of time."<sup>9</sup>

May you and I, Christ's body in this time and place, be the answer to Jesus' passionate prayer.

AMEN

1 FOSTER, JASON, DARRELL (2014) *Sursum Corda: ritual and meaning of the liturgical command in the first five centuries of the Church*, Durham theses, Durham University

<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/10707/2/SursumCordaDurhamLibrary1.pdf?DDD32>

<sup>2</sup> Foster, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 138-140

<sup>4</sup> Shea, *ibid.*, (p. 142)

<sup>5</sup> Agnes Sanford, *The Healing Light: The Art and Method of Spiritual Healing*

©1947 by Macalester Park Publishing Co., St. Paul, Minnesota. p. 33

[http://www.ezytouch.com/The\\_Healing\\_Light.pdf](http://www.ezytouch.com/The_Healing_Light.pdf) )

<sup>6</sup> Shea, *ibid.*, p. 138

<sup>7</sup> Shea, *ibid.*, p. 139

<sup>8</sup> John 17:17 (*TEV*)

<sup>9</sup> Shea, *ibid.*, p. 140