

Easter 7B 2021 Sermon

John 17:6-19

Jesus prayed for his disciples, “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.”

On the night before he will be crucified, Jesus prays for his disciples, saying, “Holy Father, *protect* them in your name...” Jesus’ prayer is that, after he leaves this earthly sphere, his disciples will be protected.

And yet, if we look at the fate of his Disciples in the years to come, that prayer seems to have fallen on deaf ears. For, according to church tradition, each of his Disciples, with the exception of John, will meet a horrific death for the very **reason** that they were followers of Jesus! It would seem that God gave Jesus the very *opposite* of what Jesus prayed for: **protection** for his disciples.

Unless – unless Jesus was praying for something **other** than protection of their *physical* lives. “Holy Father,” Jesus prays, “protect them in your name...”

Now, one’s “name” in ancient Jewish culture (and in many cultures even today) describes that person’s character, identity, spirit, disposition – that person’s very nature and being and purpose.

Remember Jacob in the Old Testament, who, in his younger life, was deceitful and cunning? He tricked his father Isaac into giving **him** the family blessing rather than Esau, his older brother, to whom the blessing *should* have gone. But as the years go by, Jacob, having run away from his brother to a foreign land,

becomes more mature, responsible, and honest. He decides to return and face his brother Esau and own up to his deceit. During the journey, he wrestles one night with an angel, who puts Jacob's hip out of joint, giving him a permanent limp. And then the angel gives him a new **name**. No longer will he be called "Jacob," which means "usurper," since he had usurped his brother's birthright. Rather, he will now be named "Israel": the man who *wrestled* with God. For, ever since he had run away to that foreign land, Jacob had been through many challenging experiences, had been humbled and wounded, with the result that his very identity, character, and nature had changed. Therefore, he needed a new name to reflect his transformed life.

In our Gospel, when Jesus prays that his Disciples be protected in God's **name**, he is praying that they remain rooted in God's character, God's spirit, God's nature, God's very Life. *The Message* translation of this passage has Jesus say, "Father... I pray for [these disciples of mine]... [G]uard them as they pursue this Life that you conferred as a gift through me, so they can be one heart and mind, as we are one heart and mind."

Jesus' disciples are at a critical turning point. After this night, their lives will never be the same. No more will they follow Jesus around, day by day, listening to his teachings, observing how he acts and lives, imbibing his spirit. Jesus doesn't want his disciples to lose the Divine Life which was God's gift to them through Jesus. And he doesn't want them to lose that unity of heart and mind which is the natural result of sharing that Divine Life.

Now, in John's Gospel, the word "world" is used to describe all that is opposed to God's will, God's spirit, God's love. "Holy Father..." Jesus prays, "the world has hated [these disciples of mine] 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." Again, Jesus is not asking that their *physical* lives be protected; but rather their spiritual lives. For, Jesus knows how easily and subtly and alluringly the world's values and ways of thinking can cause us to drift away from being centered in **God's** spirit, God's name, God's character, God's Life. This is why he tells us to pray, "let us not be led into temptation, but deliver us from evil." And, this is why, in *last* week's Gospel, Jesus kept stressing to his disciples the need to stay *connected* to him in spirit after he *leaves* them in body. "Abide in me, as I abide in you," he said. "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in – stay connected to – me." (John 15:4-5) He wants his Disciples to draw their life from **him**, *not* from the world.

My friends, for well over a year now, *our* world has been beset by a pandemic, an experience unlike anything in our lifetime. It has caused dramatic changes in our lives: how we work, how we interact socially, how we meet, how we worship, how we go to school or visit the dentist, how we communicate, how we shop for

groceries. And these changes in our behaviors have affected our consciousness: how we perceive the world and God and one another.

With the CDC announcement on Thursday, we have arrived at a major turning point in our pandemic lives: a turning point not unlike that of Jesus' disciples on the night before he will be crucified. For, in both cases, the future is uncertain, and we don't know what the "new normal" will be. Many possibilities lie before us, going forward – possibilities for our lives at work, in our families, in our church, in society as a whole.

I can imagine that today, Christ is interceding on *our* behalf, praying, "Holy Father, as your children face an uncertain future, protect them in your name... so that they may be one, as we are one." Christ knows there are many seductive temptations and enticements that "the world" and "the evil one" offer us, and he wants to protect us from those things, so that *we* may be **one**, just as he and the Father are one. *Not* divided by political party, or by our opinions about face masks or vaccines. *Not* divided by race or nationality or religion or language or economic status or who is right and who is wrong.

"Holy Father," I imagine Christ praying for us, "keep them true to your name: your character, your spirit, your nature, your love, your purpose; true to your Image and Likeness, in which you created them. Keep them in me and in you as they pursue this life that you conferred as a gift through me, so they can be one heart and mind as we are one heart and mind."

My friends, I truly believe that our risen Lord is praying the same prayer for **us** at this turning point in *our* lives that he prayed for his disciples at that turning point in *their* lives. He doesn't pray for any *specific* future, either for those disciples, or for us. Doesn't pray for prosperity, or health, or success. He prays, rather, that we abide in God's name, remain in God's spirit, God's character, God's compassion, God's love, God's Life, God's image and likeness, and not be drawn away from that by the subtle temptations of **this** world's spirit – a spirit which, rather than making us *one* like **God's** spirit does, divides us, causing us to judge, to hurt, to denigrate, even to kill.

Professor and Organization Development expert Otto Scharmer says to his corporate clients, "[T]he success of our actions as change-makers [in our companies] does not depend on *what* we do or *how* we do it, but on the *inner place from* which we operate."¹ It all depends on the inner place from which we operate.

Both we and Jesus' disciples in today's Gospel are at turning points, facing unknown futures and unseeable "new normals." What Christ prays for us is not a specific future. Rather, he focuses his prayer on the *inner place* from which we operate. Do we operate from within the spirit and values of this world? Or do

operate from within **God's** spirit, God's character, God's name, God's Life, God's heart?

What will our new normal be? It all depends on the inner place from which we operate.

AMEN

¹https://www.ottoscharmer.com/sites/default/files/Ego2Eco_Intro_0.pdf