

“SHOWING THE GLORY OF CHRIST IN US”

John 17:1-11 May 24th, 2020

This is the seventh Sunday of Easter: the final “of.” In this sermon series it’s time to turn back to the one who is “chosen and precious,” except, as you’ll see, he turns it back to us. Even when talking about himself, his own glory, he turns back to us. It’s amazing, really, in this moment, you’d think he would be focused on himself. But even in his final moments on this earth, we’re the objects of his attention and his prayer.

Glory. That’s what Jesus’ prayer is about here in the Gospel of John.

Glory. “Glorify your Son,” Jesus prays. It’s chapter seventeen, almost at the end of the Gospel. We are coming to the climax, to the end toward which the whole event was aiming from the philosophical beginning and the first miracle with water into wine and the wonder that ensued. Glorify your Son. “Your Son,” he prays.

Not me. He doesn’t say, “glorify me,” which is what you’d expect if it was just a prayer between Jesus and his Father. No, it’s not just a prayer; it’s a sermon, an announcement, a word of encouragement for those who are about to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It’s not a prayer like we understand prayers. It’s a pastoral prayer, where the pastor prays words that the congregation doesn’t have words to pray, but they can nod along as though those are exactly the words they were longing to say. Jesus prays, like that, for them and for himself, too. But through him, through his life and his suffering and his death, he prays for them.

He puts the words in their mouths.

Of course, the prayer could be a construct. Since the Gospel of John was written many years after the event, this prayer could be a prayer made up of the prayers of the church, of leaders and followers, and hopes and dreams. It could be a prayer that was really a theological treatise on the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. “Glorify your Son” as a way to explain to those who come after the event what it all means. But then again, maybe Jesus prayed this way for those who haven’t yet made it through, so that they had a word to hang on to when the wind begins to howl and the rain begins to fall, a word to cling to when the ground trembles and the temple shakes: “Glory.”

There is an amazing Oscar-winning original song by John Legend and Common from the movie *Selma*. It begins “*One day when the glory comes/It will be ours/ it will be ours/ oh one day when the war is won/we will be sure/ Oh glory (Glory, glory).*” It’s not about completion, but about hope. It is not the victory chant, though victory is assured. Glory. It is not that there isn’t suffering to come, but that there is redemption to be found even in the midst of suffering. Glory. It’s not that everything is good and right and whole, but that goodness and justice and wholeness are in sight. Glory. What a word to have on the tip of our tongues when things seem uncertain. Glory. Not the glory of this world—awards and prizes and offices and achievements; not the glory of celebrity or wealth. No, “glorify your Son” because your Son is glorifying you by finishing the work, by accepting the cross, by taking the nails, by breathing through the pain. He was glorifying God by dying. It’s true: it sounds barbaric. This is the stumbling block that Paul talks so much about. How does this cruel and painful death give God glory? Wouldn’t living be a better way to glorify?

Yes. It is a better way. For us. We are called to live, to hand over our lives to him and live. Live fully, live joyfully, live united. His dying prayer is that we might learn to do this living thing together. Together. That’s how we finish this work that he has given us to do. By living fully, joyfully, and united. In peace. Shalom, the fullness of all that God has in store for us. Our lives give God glory, because Jesus’ death gave God glory. Because he finished, we can finish.

Because he was faithful, even unto death. We can be faithful in all of life. And give God glory.

Because he was poorer than he had ever been before, he gave away everything, not holding back even the blood in his veins, the breath in his lungs.

Because he became poor, he was rich in glory. “Glorify your Son,” he prays before those confused and soon to be terrorized disciples, glorify even in death, so that there is glory in life. “I’ve glorified you,” he prayed by finishing the work.

And a day later, he says from his place of execution, “It is finished.”

In today’s text we hear Jesus’ most urgent hopes for his disciples. While shaped here as his prayer, Jesus meant for his disciples—and arguably for us two millennia later—to overhear his petitions. Hours from the crucifixion, Jesus focuses precisely on what matters most from this entire ministry. This desire to communicate one last time what is at the center of one’s life and hopes is an enduring human experience. A colleague in ministry tells the story of a young mother dying of cancer in a hospital who finds purpose and energy from the opportunity to construct a videotaped message for her preschool daughters, so that when they are older they can listen to what she most hopes will guide their lives. It is very important to her to make sure her daughters receive her motherly care and love, even though she will not be alive to speak to them in person. While this mother can only hope that the videotape will help keep her memory accessible to her children, Jesus speaks knowing that the Spirit who abides in us is able to keep his message alive in our hearts.

What is central among Jesus’ concerns? For him the culmination of his work is that we know God through his life and ministry. His final hopes are not a celebration of himself, but the recognition that his life and ministry are windows into God’s love and saving purposes. So Jesus prays that people will come to *know* God through him. “Knowing” describes a powerful, active, confessional, and intimately relational claim on our lives. Knowing God is an experience that draws believers into a new reality in which the new order that will be shaped eternally by God’s vision for love and justice and service can also be realized in relationships and communities now. Knowing God will be evident in our obedience to love, the singular commandment of this Gospel.

Today we are pausing for a moment before celebrating the birth of the new church, exploding into mission with the gifts of the Spirit, as we observe Pentecost next week. We are hearing again the prayer Jesus prayed for his disciples, a prayer we claim as his prayer for us.

There is assurance and certainty in Jesus’ prayer. Jesus has made his Father’s name known to the disciples. He has given them knowledge of the truth. Now he prays for their protection. Later he will elaborate on the need for the Father’s protection: the disciples have been hated by the world, and they are endangered by evil or the evil one (vv. 14-15). Here he asks protection for them for a particular purpose, “so that they may be one, as we are one” (v.11).

Because it is part of Jesus’ prayer, that prayer for unity can also offer us assurance and certainty, but for many of us it may also raise questions. Can we see any evidence that Jesus’ prayer was answered? What does Jesus mean any-way, when he says, “one, as we are one”?

Think about the way John’s Gospel starts: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God.” From the very first verse, John struggles to express the mystery of Jesus—that he *was* God and *distinct from* God at the same time. We look at Jesus and say, “That is what God looks like.”

When Jesus prays that his followers may be one as he and the Father are one, he is praying all of us into this mystery too. Not just that we should each become one with God, or one with Christ, but that we should become one with each other in the way Jesus and the Father are one.

In some ways, the first part of that mystery is the easy part. We all have our ways to grow in our oneness with God. We may ground our own growth in

corporate worship. We may follow a spiritual discipline of private prayer, study, and service in God's name. We may dedicate ourselves to a particular ministry in a cause of justice, or healing, or pastoral presence. No matter which path we follow toward oneness with God, the Holy Spirit can act in our lives to draw us closer, and to reveal to us the presence of God that is already nearer to than our own heartbeats. We have only to open our eyes and our ears, and remain willing to receive and respond.

Jesus is also praying that his followers may be one with one another. There, of course, is where the pain lies for us today.

It would appear that *disunity* is the defining notion in this church of ours, in this church of Jesus Christ. We have our denominations and our sub-denominations. We argue over who can be ordained and what words we can use when we pray. We argue over our alliances with this or that group around the world, or within our parish community. We argue over how our churches participate in secular life, or how religion interacts with the state. It causes enormous pain. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that it is also nothing new.

When there were still people walking the streets who had known Jesus face to face, the Christian community was arguing. They argued over who could share a meal. They argued over whose party represented the "real" church. They argued over whether you were really a Christian if you did not exhibit certain spiritual gifts. So we may wonder whether all this contention, in the past and in the present, means that Jesus' prayer has never been answered.

That option does not seem satisfactory. Does John's portrayal of Jesus seem truthful in some fundamental way? Have we found it encouraging to hear once again how Jesus prays for his disciples and for us? Do we trust that God does hear prayers and does answer them? Do we also trust that God heard Jesus' prayer that we all might be one? If we do, then our problem may be with our own assumptions of what unity is. We may need to think differently somehow, when we think about Christians "being one."

Jesus prayed "that they may be one, *as we are one*" (17:11). "The Word was *with* God, and the Word *was God*" (1:1). Some ancient theologians who studied these very verses talked about Jesus' oneness with the Father in terms that suggest *movement*—a kind of interweaving or even a dance among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. What if the answer to Jesus' prayer for unity was not about solidifying into a monolithic block but, rather, was about joyful interplay, glorious dancing? If we tried that idea on for awhile, could it affect how we view our own disagreements with our brothers and sister? Perhaps the vision toward which we strive is not one of total agreement but of the ability to join, in our different ways, in the common dance of faith.

It is just possible that this *is* what Christian unity looks like—a body, as Paul said, with many parts, a dance with many dancers, a song with many voices. The challenge to us, in response to all this variety, is to say yes. Yes, those *other* people really are Christians too. Yes, there is pain in all this diversity, but there is also possibility. Yes, there is struggle, but there is also glory.

Do we find all this movement, all this action, disorienting? Does our anxiety about conflict lure us into wishing for something less dramatic? This Christian community of ours can be wild and frustrating and crazy, but we place our trust in that prayer of Jesus. The disciples Jesus loved, and the community he loves now, lived and still live—enveloped by that prayer.

Please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, through your Son Jesus Christ you still pray for us. Help us to hear that prayer, and in all that we do and all that we say, may your Church begin to live a life based in your prayer for us that being formed in your image we may continue to be the people you called us to be from the foundations of the earth. Amen.

