

Sermon Easter 7 Year A 2020

The gospel for this seventh Sunday of Easter (or Sunday after Ascension) places firmly before us a striking contrast, a powerful play of tensions. On the one hand, Our Lord lays out for us an incredibly wide horizon. It is the horizon of Jesus' glory; the horizon of eternal life and of the mystery of the Godhead; the horizon of the unique relationship Jesus shares with the Father, the relationship of perfect union. But this broad, expansive horizon - indeed we must say the widest of horizons - plays out against a remarkable context.

This prayer Jesus utters to the Father (in which the evangelists place us - the reader - as privileged eaves-droppers), is a prayer set on the night of his Passion. It may seem curious to us that we hear this reading just as we celebrated Ascension on Thursday and look toward the great feast of Pentecost next week. But we hear this reading today because it is surely the church's mind that Christ's ascent to glory and the outpouring of the Spirit must be considered as *the one, saving act of God* along with the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord. We cannot have one without the others. They all together speak to and inform each other. Glory and Cross belong together.

So, against the wide horizon of Jesus' prayer is the last meal he shares with his friends. He has washed their feet and set before them a long set of teachings and instructions. In a few verses Jesus and his disciples will move to the Garden where he will be arrested. In other words, the focus of Jesus' life and ministry narrows. The narrative which surrounds what we hear today has come to the pointy end. And the context - even as Jesus speaks of glory and of the mystery of God, of eternal life, of union with God - is framed by his own death, and so the loss, grief, and indeed sadness of the disciples.

Faith in the risen, ascended and glorified Lord means we must keep our hearts and minds and lives fixed on the wide horizon. Even if our context narrows. Even if our context is marked by grief, loss and sorrow. 2020 (and we are not even halfway through!) has given us all our fair share of sadness. COVID-19 has forced us all to maintain physical distance, to cancel our services, to keep us apart, away from our churches and away from the Eucharist. What, then, does Jesus' prayer for us all to be one mean here, for us, in our times? How can we "be one" when we have to settle for online services, phone calls, and Zoom meetings rather than the hugs, sacraments, and in-person contact and connection to which we are so accustomed?

Now, the church throughout its winding history has had, of course, its share of sadness. Before now churches have had to close due to pandemics in many of the same ways that we have had to close in 2020. Part of our story is of plagues ripping through populations, forcing separations and leaving sickness and death in their wake. In turbulent times, it is helpful to remember that we are not the first to walk the road before us. We are not the first church to experience the sadness caused by disease.

Perhaps one thing this pandemic has done for us is to point out that we don't often know how to be separate but still united. Now, as we read today's gospel portion in light of the Ascension, we realize that *that is exactly* what Jesus is preparing his friends and followers for: to remain united with him, and with each other, even when he is not physically present.

Early on in the unfolding drama of this pandemic I was reminded that 'crisis will show true character.' And on more than a few occasions (even in the life of this church) this has proved correct. Later in this 17th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus will say, "*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.*" So, we must say crisis also teaches us truth. This is as true for the disciples at the time of Jesus' death, as it is true of us here and now. In the Gospel of John, Jesus *himself* is the Word made flesh, the truth made flesh. As we heard a couple weeks ago: *I am the way the truth and the life.* In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the disciples learn that the worst thing is never the last thing; that even if our focus narrows through loss and sadness we can place these very things onto a horizon of hope; and that in Christ, all things are made new. In our own time, perhaps, we are learning similar things.

When Christ ascended, the disciples looked around at each other, and the sky, such that the angels standing by asked them, "*Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*" Perhaps in this we might find some comfort and reassurance. It is okay not to know what to do next. It is okay to be still. It is okay to put one foot in front of the other and muddle through. And it is okay to be taken aback, to be unsettled, by physical separation from those we love and whose presence lifts us up.

It might be our prayer that we learn, if we haven't already, to be with one another, united in Christ, even when we are not physically present. And in our absence to at least appreciate each other more, our community more, what we share in Christ more. Yes, we have to work hard at it and to not depend on old habits. We have to learn new habits, new ways of being. Even in our sadness - and the separation that to a degree continues - we must remain united in our love for Christ and for one another.

During this time our priorities are clarified. We see that what truly matters is indeed our union with Christ, our depending on him and him alone. And perhaps, then, Christ's own prayer that we be one and that we be sanctified in truth is answered in our lives and in our own church. You see, then, that the experience of loss and sadness which limits our focus at the same time opens up for us a wide horizon.

And so this time might also serve to teach us other things, such as how we are united in Christ with people we have never met: Christians around the world continue to gather, and Christ's prayer is that we be one with them as well! This time, then, might be one in which we are reawakened to the profound truth that Christ is holding us together with all his people around the world. Even though we cannot be physically present with Christians in other parts of the world, we are united with them in Christ, just as we have been united even in our separations.

And we are also united with the saints throughout history: Christian heroes from all walks of life and throughout the ages are united with us, too - the communion of saints - though we have never been able to be physically present with them. Perhaps during this time, the people of this church - whose dedication is to All the Saints - may discover some of the saints as real friends and companions on the Way. Our friendship with them can show us that physical separation - even separation in time and language and culture - is no obstacle to Christ, who holds us all together in love.

This pandemic can teach us more than how to better wash our hands! It can do more than be a moment of sadness for us. A wider vision is put to us. This time can truly teach us to be one in Christ with people with whom we may never be physically present in this life. It can serve as a reminder that regardless, we *are* all one in Christ, and Christ is with us, now and always. In Christ, neither death, nor life, nor even pandemics, can separate us. Amen.