

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

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Date: May 16, 2021 Year B 7th Sunday of Easter

Text: John 17:6-19

Title: Jesus Prays. . . (for Disciples in the World)

Focus: Jesus prays for the disciples, those he sends into the world. It's an intimate prayer by Jesus with God on behalf of disciples which we get to "overhear" praying that they would be protected (vv. 11, 12, 15), sanctified (v. 17, 19) and sent into the world (vv. 18).

Gospel Reading: John 17:6-19

⁶I 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. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

¹¹And 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. ¹²While 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. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴I 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. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

Jesus Prays for the Disciples

Stephanie Leff, our Faith Formation Director, and I have been meeting over this last year with students in our Confirmation program. I have been reading drafts of the faith statements of 8th and 9th graders who will be coming next Sunday at the 11 a.m. service to *confirm* or *affirm* the promises made on their behalf at their baptism.

I'll say more about their faith statements next week as we welcome them, but one of the topics that some of them have commented on that relates to this week's gospel reading is **how or what do we think of God's presence in the midst of hard times.**

The most shorthand way of expressing this is, "Why?" or "Why, God?"

Here's how one student expressed the topic with a bit more context or explanation:

It's been a tough year. A lot has happened, and there were many times that it was hard to see the good in it. When it seems that only bad things are happening, it can be hard to find the good. It is also easy to start doubting God. After all, why would God let these bad things happen? But one of the things the Bible and confirmation has taught me is that I am not the first person to have doubts or questions, and that it is okay and normal to have doubts and questions during difficult times.

We have all lived through a difficult year, haven't we?

There is a classic book on spirituality which addresses this struggle to find meaning or make sense of suffering called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Rabbi Harold Kushner¹. For Rabbi Kushner, writing the book was prompted by his three-year-old son's diagnosis with a degenerative disease that meant the boy would likely only live until his early teens. A number of years later, he wrote about the doubts and fears that he experienced during that challenging time. The book became a bestseller because of the common experience of trying to make sense of things when we encounter times of tragedy and sorrow.

Isn't it a question that we have all struggled with?

- "Why?"
- "How could or how can this happen?"
- Or maybe even more pointedly, "How, God, could you let this happen?"

This passage from John is one to consider as we ask such questions.

The Farewell Discourse

Today's Gospel text is from John 17:6-9. I mentioned last week that the larger section of chapters 14-17 of John is called the "Farewell Discourse."

The Farewell Discourse captures Jesus' final words to his disciples as he knows his death is approaching. Jesus wishes to reassure and comfort them and give them some instruction for the future.

Genre: As we have progressed through the Farewell Discourses over the last few weeks, we have seen Jesus speaking with and instructing the disciples. Last week, we recalled how his interaction and instruction was also punctuated by what he himself did. He showed them he loved them by washing their feet, by taking the role of a servant, and then by directly instructing them to do the same: "As I have loved you, you also ought to love one another." Jesus redefined love.

So, in previous readings or sections we have story/narrative, discussion, interaction, teaching. . . Today's reading is different. It's not a story about Jesus *and* the disciples or Jesus teaching the disciples. In this section of John chapter 17, Jesus is directly praying *for* the disciples. This is the evening before his crucifixion. Immediately

¹ Originally published in 1981 and a NY Times best-seller.

following the prayer, Jesus and the disciples go across the Kidron Valley to the garden where Judas will betray him.

Again, as I said last week, this context is important. The most striking thing to me established by the context—particularly by the setting or timing is that this is Jesus is praying *for* the disciples and it's *on the eve of his death*. At a time when you could imagine that his own anxiety and distress about his suffering and death would cause him to be most focused on himself, he prays *for* the disciples. This prayer is all about the disciples and all about the future. Jesus will have his time of prayer in which his own fears and concerns come out when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, but right now it's all about praying for them and preparing them for the future.

That's what I see as a response to those questions when we encounter difficult times, when we ask

- “Why?”
- “How could or how can this happen?”
- Or maybe even more pointedly, “How, God, could you let this happen?”

When Jesus knows his own betrayal, suffering, death are just around the corner, he spends this time praying for the disciples. He is earnestly praying for their protection and their future in a difficult world.

If this is the way that Jesus is on the eve of his death with the disciples, then can't we take comfort in the assurance of God's presence with us during difficult times? Isn't this an answer to the questions we ask when encountering hardship?

What do you imagine it's like to hear Jesus pray for them?

Prayer is a chance to share our deep-seated concerns, worries, and fears and ask for help. Notice how honest Jesus is about his concerns. He knows it's going to be hard for his disciples, that the world will be hard on them, and does not hide that. Prayer is a time to tell the truth.²

There is tremendous intimacy here: first because it seems like we're eavesdropping on Jesus' prayer with God.

- There are many times in the gospels in which Jesus talks about prayer and teaches about prayer.
- There are times in which have references to Jesus praying—such as when we read that he went away to a deserted place to pray. So, we see that he took time to pray and reconnect with God.
- There are some other times in which we have a brief glimpse of Jesus at prayer and we as readers witness those prayers, such as
 - Before the raising of Lazarus (John 11:41-42)³
 - Jesus' anguished prayer in the garden of Gethsemane
 - His brief prayers on the cross

² See comments from David Lose's commentary at *Working Preacher* from 2018.

³ . . . “Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.” (John 11:41-42)

- **But this is the most extended time of personal prayer which we are invited to observe. The intimacy is remarkable--maybe it's even a bit unsettling to be invited in so closely.**

The intimacy into which we are invited, or at least invited to observe, is not just to observe the relationship between Jesus and God reflected generally in the prayer, but in the content of the prayer in the concerns expressed for the disciples. Jesus prays:

- “These are yours, you gave them to me, I protected them while they were with me. . . protect them from evil. . .”

In his prayer, Jesus describes the world as a *difficult place*.

This perhaps doesn't seem like much of a promise, or at least good news. But it's the truth, and given how many voices in our culture invite us to imagine that if we just buy the right product or vote for the right candidate, then life will be all fine and dandy, it's important that the Church be a place where we can stop pretending that everything is perfect and tell each other the truth. Jesus knows that his departure will prove immensely challenging for his disciples, and he does not sugarcoat that but instead tells them the truth. It's an example that encourages us to do the same. (David Lose)

Christian faith does not provide an escape from life's difficulties, but rather offers support to flourish amid them.

Jesus prays, “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.”

But maybe you imagine the disciples saying, “*Oh, how much easier it would be if you would only take us with you.*”

But that is not Jesus' promise. Instead, in his prayer he asks for God's support and protection of them against all the evils of the world. If it is true that world can be difficult, painful, and tumultuous, then Jesus does not promise them escape from that, but that they are not alone as he prays for them:

- The promise that Jesus makes his disciples then and now: not that they are *exempt* from struggle, but that *they are not alone* in those struggles.

We are here for a purpose: to care for this world God loves so much.

World is one of the repeated words in this passage. (A striking 13 times in 19 verses.) John's use of the term shows that the world, as we said, is a place of difficulty and so Jesus prays for protection for them, but this is also the world that God so loved (John 3:16). Jesus sends the disciples to serve in that world just as he was sent.

Another look at the Farewell Discourse

Over the last few weeks, the gospel readings have featured Jesus talking again and again about being connected.

- He said, “I am the vine. . .” (John 15:1, 5)
- He said, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” (John 15:5).
- He invited, “Abide in me. . .”
- He promised “When you abide in me, you bear much fruit. . .”

In these passages over recent weeks and throughout John's gospel, it's all about connection and being invited into a sustaining relationship.

Remember the opening scenario and questions?

- Where is God in the midst of hard times?
- We ask, "Why?" or "Why, God?"

In this prayer, Jesus prays for the disciples, those who belong to him, those he loves. Just as the Father sent Jesus into the world, Jesus sends the disciples into the world to continue his mission.

May we draw comfort and be strengthened that Jesus prays for us and is present with us in the same way.