

Year C Easter 7 John 17 20 to 26

What we just heard is the final part of Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples at their Last Supper together before he is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is one of those passages in John that, I find, can make your head spin a little – perhaps a lot. If it sounds a little confusing and repetitive to you, well, that's because it is so let's make some sense of it together.

The part of the farewell discourse that we hear today is Jesus' prayer to God, the Father – for his disciples. This prayer, though, includes us – many years later and far removed from the Middle East where this was first spoken – it includes us and that is incredibly important for us to know. I pray, Jesus says to God the Father, not only on behalf of these disciples sitting in front of me right now...but also for those future disciples who will come to believe through the word of these ones.

What is Jesus praying for? Before we tackle that question, let us recall where we are at in the sequence of events leading to Jesus' death on the cross. As the disciples ate their final meal together, Jesus washed all of their feet. To their shock and dismay, he told them one of them would betray him and Judas has left the room in order to put that betrayal in motion. Jesus has been talking to the disciples for a long time already this evening – trying, as best he could, to explain what was about to happen and to comfort them by telling them he would give to them the presence of the Holy Spirit to be their Advocate and Guide in his physical absence. He has given them lengthy instructions about being a community together, loving each other as he has loved them, and using the imagery of the vine and the branches he has explained that they are still connected to him – the vine – as well as to each other – the branches.

Having said all he could say and knowing his time with them as well as his life was coming to an end, he prays for them and for us. We are, in today's Gospel, overhearing Jesus express his love, his friendship, and his final earnest desire for us, for what we are to be and do. These are moments for us not of action but of awe as we find ourselves the topic of conversation of our God.

Jesus asks that we may be one – one with each other and one in God, just as God the Father and God the Son are one in each other. This is so important to him that he says it over and over again – sometimes in slightly different ways – throughout these few short verses and this repetition can cause this brief passage to feel confusing. I ask “that they may all be one,” he prays. “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” This is Jesus' strong, heartfelt desire for us, stated again and again, because it is his purpose – God's purpose: Complete reconciliation among humanity, with the world, and with God so that we, and all creation, will experience the perfect unity, peace, and love that God experiences...that God *is*.

And let us not miss the extraordinary way in which we are to experience this complete reconciliation: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” Jesus is praying that we will be a part of the life of God – drawn into the life of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not just with God but in God, is Jesus' prayer for us. “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” We know that there is no separation between Jesus and the Father – we believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – one God, no separation, and this is what Jesus is today praying for, for us. No separation between us and God...the branches on the vine.

Throughout John's Gospel, when Jesus speaks of his oneness with the Father, he is speaking of the perfect love they have for one another. To be one with God is to know God's perfect love and to learn to share God's perfect love. So when Jesus prays for this same oneness, that we are to have with God, to be the oneness we are to have with one another and with all of creation, he means, "so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

We learned last week that Jesus *has* made his dwelling place in us, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The purpose of the Spirit is to be our Comforter, our Advocate, our teacher, and our guide...to continue what Jesus began...to bring us to perfection. "I in them," Jesus prays today, "I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one." The word "completely", is the Greek word *teteleiomeno*i which means fully complete, no more to be added, in the sense of having achieved perfection. We are to be perfect as God is perfect (Matt.5:28). We in the western church tend to ignore or have very little to do with this idea of being made perfect in Christ because we have been trained, instead, to think of ourselves as very imperfect, "not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under" God's table. We hear much more often of judgement and believe we must first die and "make it into heaven" and then we will be made perfect. This is not what Jesus tells us and this is not what the Gospel writers tell us according to Jesus' teachings. Jesus dwells within us and we are in the ever-constant process of being drawn toward perfection. There is judgement but it is the judgement of a loving God whose last prayer before his death is that we love one another as he has loved us, to be one with each other and with him as he and the Father are one.

We are told why this is his earnest last request. It is so that the whole world may come to believe through seeing the perfect love of God reflected in our lives with each other. So, yes, there is judgement but it is the judgement of a loving God who desires that all of his good creation be reconciled with each other and with God. As I mentioned last week and will say again because it is so important for us to remember: This is our training ground, so to speak. We are the church, the body of Christ, when we gather here with God. Together we experience the perfection of God's kingdom that we are being drawn towards. Our prayers that we say, the Word of God that we hear, our words to each other in the Peace, our sharing in the bread of God's table...each time the church is the church in gathering, we are living, in this place and time, in the perfect kingdom of God.

The key to living in God's peace and love, to hearing the shepherd's voice over the world's voice, begins here in what we do as the church. Love one another as I have loved you, says Jesus, who washed his betrayer's feet. Being in the process of perfection, does not mean that we will always get along, will always agree, never squabble. We are one in Christ whether we agree with each other or not. We are one in Christ whether we like one another or not. To become a part of Christ is to become a part of the community; a part of the one. We are in the process of perfection.

I have mentioned before that the early church grew in spite of their closed doors and secrecy for fear of persecution. Outsiders looking at the newly formed Christian communities marvelled at them and said, "See how they love one another." Luke describes this fledgling Church in Acts writing, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of

bread and to prayer...All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they shared with anyone who was in need.

With one accord they continued to meet daily in the temple courts and to break bread from house to house, sharing their meals with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47). Luke later writes of this oneness again and says, “the multitude of believers was one in heart and soul” (Acts 4:32).

Does this mean everything was perfect, no arguing in the early Church? No...we know from Paul’s letters that there were troubles then too but they worked at solving their troubles, aware that they were in the process of perfection. The Rev. Steven J. Cole writes, “If we separate from those who differ from us on minor matters, we will soon be left all alone.” He goes on to point out that these minor matters are often “manmade” spiritual rules.<sup>1</sup> One that immediately comes to mind is the rule about what to wear to church – your Sunday best, as it were. I remember an older lady at St. Paul’s, South Porcupine, who prided herself on knowing the Scripture and on asking herself, “What would Jesus do?” when she was making decisions. She, one day, criticized a teenage server because this young girl was wearing jeans under her server’s alb. Well, that teenage girl stopped coming to church and so did the rest of the family. Jesus hung out with the outcasts and sinners, the rag-tag homeless and the crippled beggars on the street. What would Jesus have done? We sometimes have a spiritual blindness

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<sup>1</sup> [Lesson 92: Getting Along in Spite of Our Differences \(Romans 14:1-4\) | Bible.org](#)

that masks our own divisive and unloving behaviours with what we consider to be righteousness and piety. We must engage in honest self-reflection if we are to rid ourselves of these behaviours that hinder us from truly being one with each other and with God, that stop us from truly loving one another as Jesus showed us how to love.

We are in the process of perfection and there is much evidence that our love and care for one another is outweighing the need to be “right”, outweighing personal opinion...a helping hand, a kind word, a “just checking in” phone call or card, and so on.

When the church is the church – the body of Christ – the church flourishes. As Luke points out, we are the church when we gather together, worship together, break bread together, and share with anyone in need.

Jesus prays, "I ask not only on behalf of these [disciples with me now], but also on behalf of those hearing this or reading this who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Let us *be* the Church and hear the world say about us, “See how they love one another.”