

The Seventh Sunday of Easter - May 4, 2008

Queen Anne Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Laurie Rudel, Pastor

Text: John 17:1-11

Our text from John this morning takes us through half of the last chapter from the “Farewell Discourse.” This four chapter section appears only in the Gospel of John. It takes place following the last supper that Jesus eats with followers.

It begins with an act of servant-hood where—in spite of his followers protest that they are not worthy—Jesus wraps a towel around his waist and washes the feet of his disciples.

Next he begins a very long monologue—a kind of last will and testament—that summarize his teaching:

just as I have loved you you should love one another;

peace I leave with you, my peace I give you;

I am the vine, you are the branches;

do not let your hearts be troubled.

You might remember that as Jesus lays out his teachings he entertains a question from Thomas—*How can we know the way to where you are going?* And a desire from Philip—*Jesus, just show us God and we will be set to continue on without you.*

Jesus does not respond to either one—he just kept pointing to himself, to God, and back to them.

As I worked with and mulled over Jesus’ last words for today I found them, like Thomas and Philip, very slippery and fluid, a little rambling—kind of like the note that we just left for our cat sitter, Rene:

the cats are all “indoor” cats; they like a half can of cat food right when they get up in the morning, a quarter of a can in the late afternoon or early evening, and a quarter when they go to bed at night;

you are welcome to eat anything;

we finished sealing the shower in the back bedroom, so feel free to use it;

if you push the correct combination of buttons you can make the VCR or the DVD work (we have no television reception);

and please make yourself right at home, oh, and remember to take in the garbage can on Friday evening.

I shudder to think that if, for some reason we were killed, God forbid, in an airplane accident, this house note would be the equivalent of our last will and testament. *Gosh*, someone

might observe, *they really did love the Sunday edition of The Seattle Times since that was the only copy they wanted saved. I wonder why that was? And those cats . . . they must love cats . . .*

Other people's last words can be equally prosaic:

Leonard Bernstein said, *What's this?*

Barb Ruth said, *I'm going over the valley.*

Cotton Mather said, *Is this all? Is this what I feared when I prayed against a hard death? Oh, I can bear this. I can bear it!*

Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, said, *I am tired of ruling over slaves.*

Louise, Queen of Prussia, said, *I am a queen, but I have no power to move my arms.*

Queen Elizabeth I said, *All my possessions for one moment of time.*

Phillip III, King of Spain, said, *Oh would to God I have never reigned. Oh that those years in my kingdom I had lived a solitary life in the wilderness. Oh that I had lived alone with God. How much more secure should I have died. With how much more confidence should I have gone to the throne of God. What doth my glory profit but that I have so much the more torment in my death?*

Francis Buckland, an inspector of fisheries, said, *God is good to the little fishes, I do not believe He would let their inspector suffer shipwreck at last.*

And Oscar Wilde, dying in a tacky Paris hotel, said, *My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One of us has to go.*

Jesus' last words filled with words like gloryify and authority and truth and eternal life are just so slippery and slidy to the mind that the intellect longs to grab hold of Jesus, to lock the door so he cannot leave and make him sit down and say it all more clearly.

Hoever, left alone as we are I do believe that together we **could** and make an orderly systematic diagram showing in great detail how Jesus is connected to God before creation began [draw a big arrow back to the beginning of time], and how God pours God's self into Jesus [draw downward arrow] and how Jesus' deep connection to God is maintained throughout his life and work [draw upward arrow] and how Jesus shines with the glory of God [draw rays of light emanating from Jesus]—given enough newprint and colored markers we could do this . . . but it would do little to illustrate the point of this passage, this last prayer that Jesus offers his followers.

When I can relax my mind what I sense here is that Jesus is speaking directly to the soul of his followers, to the pure God-part of us, that mind cannot touch.

In this final prayer Jesus seeks to re-create, or activate, secure ground within his followers to **know-beyond-knowing** that he cannot be separate from them and that they cannot be separate from him and that every single thing is contained within the realm of God **no matter what** the circumstances of their lives.

I love this image of Jesus praying over, protecting, encouraging: in our better moments can we sometimes sense his tender hands, his presence, his whispered prayer?

What I love is the sense that because of Jesus' prayer-full intention toward us we can and do embody the resurrected energy of Christ. We are given Christ's power to be at work restoring the world, ending dis-unity, making peace, giving us eternal life—which according to Jesus is being held in the loving embrace of God now, in this life, in this moment: *that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

On Friday I was telling Barb about our text for this morning. As she did a little research on my behalf she found a comic strip online called *Agnus Day* in which two sheep—Rick and Ted—talk about this last prayer of Jesus, sometimes called his “high priestly” prayer.

Rick observes: Obviously Jesus' prayer didn't work. He only asks for **two** things: glory for himself and safety for the disciples and then-he gets killed and **they** get martyred!

Ted: But Jesus' glory is the cross and the church's mission **happens**.

Rick: Clearly, I need to **explicitly** define my terms when I pray!

Tony Compolo, a writer and theologian, tells a story about being in a worship service where a man prayed aloud for a friend. *Dear Lord, you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile. He's leaving his wife and kids. Please do something to bring the family together.* The man prayed again, repeating the location, *silver trailer down the road a mile.*

Annoyed, Tony wanted to say, *Enough already. Do you think God's asking what's that address again?*

Anyway, after the prayer service Tony was driving home when on the turnpike he noticed a hitchhiker. He decided to give him a lift. *My name's Tony, Compolo said. What's yours?*

Charlie Stoltzfus, said the hitchhiker.

Tony was dumbfounded. He got off at the next exit.

Hey where are you taking me?

Home, said Tony. The hitchhiker stared in amazement as Tony drove right to the young man's silver trailer. That afternoon that young man and his wife gave themselves to each other and to God.

In his book *Den of Lions: Memoirs of Seven Years*, Terry Anderson tells of his captivity in Biuret. He admitted that he, a lapsed Catholic, was made strong because of prayer. About a month after his captivity he and the others were given Bibles. With nothing else to do he read and reread it.

He was especially drawn to the apostle Paul who struggled with his weakness, imprisonment, and pride just as Terry did. Through Paul's struggles Terry was able to express his love for God. His only prayer was to ask for patience and strength to endure whatever came, the very prayer that Jesus prays for him in our text this morning.

Before his own death the Indian chief Crowfoot said, *A little while and I will be gone from you. Wither I cannot tell. From nowhere we come, into nowhere we go. What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.*

Dominique Bouhours, a seventeenth-century French Jesuit who was the leading grammarian of his day, said, *I am about to—or I am going to—die; either expression is used.*

Abba Benjamin, one of the Desert Fathers, taught his sons this as he was dying: *Do this, and you'll be saved: Rejoice always, pray constantly, and in all circumstances give thanks.*

For as the Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the church in Rome: *If God is for us, who is against us? . . . Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height or depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

This is the gift of God to us in Christ Jesus: how would our lives be different if we trusted in abiding love?