Easter 7B. May 12, 2024. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. Acts 1:15-17, 21-26. Psalm 1. I John 5:9-13. John 17:6-19.

The Gospel

‘I 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. [7]Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; [8]for 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. [9]I 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. [10]All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. [11]And 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. [12]While 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. [13]But 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. [14]I 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. [15]I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. [16]They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. [17]Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. [18]As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. [19]And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

The Sermon

This past Thursday the wider church marked the Ascension: the event that helped the early church understand why Jesus was no longer with them bodily. I won’t attempt to explain it. But I did once tell the story to some children in a church with large open windows above the chancel. As I was concluding the story, one little boy raised his hand, looked up at the windows, and declared, “I think I see Jesus.”

Maybe that’s as good as it gets when trying to understand such an other-worldly story.

It IS other-worldly to be sure.

Today we are still celebrating Easter, and next Sunday is Pentecost. There are 10 days between the Ascension and Pentecost: 10 days that the disciples didn't know what to do or think. If there ever were a time of transition, it was those 10 days. We know the men and women were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, but they didn't know that yet.

We assume they wanted to disperse to Galilee or other places where some of them had homes. Yet they were obeying Jesus' request that they stay in Jerusalem even though they feared that the religious leaders could still come after them – as later some of those leaders did.

During that time of transition, they may have remembered the prayers Jesus said for them the night in which he was betrayed. We heard part of those prayers in today's Gospel. Jesus prayed that they might be protected, that they might be united, that they might have joy, and lastly that they may be made holy – sanctified – in God's truth. Protected, united, made joyful and made holy.

Protected from the world, united, joyful and holy despite the world. The world – in this context – means anything that is not godly, god-pleasing, good. The world emphasizes getting "more, more, more" wealth and power and manipulates people to achieve those goals. If the church or any of us act as though we are an institution or an individual just like all worldly institutions or individuals, we have contradicted what Jesus has prayed for us.

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Father Richard Rohr talks about simplicity as a way to combat worldliness. He describes Jesus as "entirely single-hearted. His life was all about doing the will of the One who sent him, the One he loved above all. To Jesus, it was that simple." He continues, "Only through simplicity can we find deep contentment instead of perpetually striving and living unsatisfied."

Father Rohr doesn't mean we shouldn't buy things we need and even want, but he does suggest we work hard at discerning what we really do need and why. Thomas

Merton speaks of discerning what is enough: “Knowing when you do not need any more. Acting just enough. Saying enough. Stopping when there is enough.”[1]

Good life advice. And good advice for all our times of transition. Transition from working to retirement, transition we call “empty nesting”, transition here in the church between settled priests, what we call “interim” time, transition nationally and locally with every election, every treaty, every declaration of war.

“Knowing when you do not need any more. Acting just enough. Saying enough. Stopping when there is enough.” And trusting that Jesus’ prayer for us to be other-worldly will be answered in how we live.

Jesus was not praying to change God’s mind or heart. God’s mind and heart are Jesus’ mind and heart and this mind and heart desires only good and life and love. Jesus’ words are for the disciples and recorded by St. John for US. The prayer is to change US.

When I pray, I pray knowing that God already knows our needs. We don’t have to give God direction about what we need nor change God’s mind about what is best. We have read in the scriptures that the Holy Spirit prays for us with sighs deeper than words, for “we know not how to pray.”

But when I pray with someone, say a grandchild, I pray the words that will comfort that child. Bless Mom and Daddy, keep us safe till morning light, help us with tomorrow’s schoolwork, or, please help Gracie’s sore throat get better. I’m not trying to change God’s mind. God knows what Gracie needs and God desires it. Sadly, the world may interfere with God’s desires – but Jesus was well aware of that.

I cringe a little when people tell me that their prayers “worked.” As if, because they prayed, God was merciful and healed someone or provided help when needed. Prayer “works” when WE are changed, when we find ourselves giving thanks for healing or help and when we give ourselves over to circumstances we cannot

[1] Prompted by the life and writings of Thomas Merton, Sophfronia Scott commented in Richard Rohr’s weekly "Center for Action and Contemplation" meditations@cac.org. May 3, 2024.

change and ask God to help us accept them, when we know and trust God's promises to be with us. God doesn't stop the tragedies of this world, but accompanies us through them. In a dark hour, Jesus prayed, "Thy will be done."

Prayer "works" when Gracie falls asleep with comfort in her heart. Prayer "works" when a meeting runs smoothly because people become aware of God's presence in that room. Prayer "works" when we pray for the poor and we find a way to deliver food or showers and when we advocate for affordable housing and social services.

We pray for many sick people deeply dear to us. These prayers "work" even if the body is not returned to physical health or the illness "cured." These prayers "work" when our brother or sister is made whole – healed -- in mind and spirit, brought closer to God and surrounded by the warmth and love of the community.

Prayer "works" when we ask God's forgiveness and our hearts are warmed and we are given strength to head out on Monday with a clean slate and a willing spirit.

My dad said he prayed for us kids every day we walked together on this earth. We pray for the sick, we remember the bereaved. We value every prayer said for us, for, as a good friend said, "I don't know how I'd get through this, if I didn't have faith in God and know people are praying for me."

And so, following Jesus' example, we keep on praying. WE are changed by the prayers we know are said. I have joy knowing my dad prayed for me every day. I am confident knowing that Jesus prays for us.

In our Centering Prayer gatherings on Wednesdays in the parish hall, our leader Sylvia often concludes our prayers with the words, "Help us hear your prayers to us." God indeed desires that we do the work he put us here to do.

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Today we remember our mothers. We give thanks for the good they gave us in our lives, how they may have taught us to pray. And we remember all the people who have "mothered" us along the way: teachers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbors, school bus drivers – we are blessed for those mothering influences. And we are blessed when we can be a mother figure to a younger person.

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Whether we feel settled or in transition – may we continue to trust that God's will be done in our lives. The church explained the Ascension as necessary so that Jesus could be with all of us in all places all the time, not just in the Holy Land for 33 years. Like the little boy hearing the Ascension story, may we also look up and say, "I think I see Jesus." This past Ascension Day, one of my priest friends closed her email to me with these words, "See you around, Jesus!"

See you around, Jesus! Amen.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! [Congregation: The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!]