

Sermon – John 17:1-11  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
7 Easter – Year A  
24 May 2020

“In-Between Prayers”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

***He is risen indeed! Alleluia!***

1. There are, I suppose, different ways of marking time these days. Given that the patterns of my life are shaped by the return of Sunday, that’s how I count. So I happen to know that today is the eleventh Sunday in a row that we have gathered for worship from a distance. This time has been difficult. So much has been lost, most notably the nearly 100,000 people who have died from COVID-19. Even those who have not been directly affected by the coronavirus have been greatly impacted. It is hard to find a silver lining in any of this but, lest despair take over, we have to name our blessings even in the midst of difficulty. So it is that I have chosen to find joy in a number of things. First, I get to spend more time with my family. This is a joy to me, though my family might have other views on the matter. Second, greenhouse gas emissions are down by about 17 percent, which is good news but fleeting unless we learn how to better care for the planet. You know, it seems that for every piece of good news I mention, I find a way to undercut it. Okay, here’s the silver lining without a downside: At least the challenge of the coronavirus has united us as a country, brought us together in a common spirit of purpose, and helped us shape a vision of how to respond to and overcome the challenges we face, with love and mutual respect shared between all people. Wait. Are you telling me this hasn’t happened? That we’re just as partisan as ever? That there is not only deep disagreement but also rampant rancor among the people? Geez, who would’ve thunk it?

2. The night before he was to face death on the cross of Calvary, Jesus does something remarkable. After talking to his friends for three chapters' worth of gospel, he begins to talk to his Father. Jesus prays. For his friends. For us. His prayer has two main petitions: protection and unity. Jesus prays for unity among believers. Apart from a faith that acknowledges the mysteriousness of God's ways, I might be tempted to say his prayer is not working. Never mind the deep disagreements among people in general, the divisions between people who call upon Jesus as Lord are often the worst of all. Still, Jesus prays that we would be one as he goes to the cross.
3. It is hard *not* to wonder why we suffer from such disunity, although human sin is a pretty good place to start. We do not simply disagree; we are tribal, combative, angry. And it is not as simple as saying that there are well-intentioned people and less-than-well intentioned people on both sides of any given debate, although that may be true. True, but not helpful. The fact of the matter is that we cannot relativize our disagreements and say that all points of view are equal. You can yell all you want about how two plus two is five, or that *The Empire Strikes Back* isn't the best movie ever, but you're still wrong. Truth is still truth, and falsehood still isn't. Be that as it may, we often find ourselves deadlocked, mired in bitter standoffs. Where do we go? Well, we begin not by arguing our way to unity but by realizing that we're already there. We are not united because we agree, but because Jesus unites us. Our unity is not something to achieve; it is something to receive. Our unity isn't a goal; it is a gift.
4. In his prayer to the Father, Jesus weaves us into the story of God: *All mine are yours, and yours are mine*. Jesus' entire ministry, from incarnation to crucifixion, from resurrection to ascension, is a prayer from Son to Father, from God to God – a prayer that not only asks for something but makes it so. This is most clearly evident in his suffering and death, which he refers to as his glorification. Nowhere is the love of God more clearly displayed than in

Jesus' self-giving death; nowhere is the glory of God more manifest than in the suffering of the Son. In his dying and in his rising, Jesus has claimed us for God. We belong to the Lord, not because we want to, or because our prior conditions have been met, or because we've changed our opponents' minds through clever memes and angry interchanges on social media. We belong to the Lord – all of us, like it or not – because God has taken us into God's own story through the lived prayer of Jesus. In his death, our old lives have ended. In his life, we live. And we do so as one people, united in Christ by the God who would not have it any other way.

5. St. Peter, so important in helping the early Church live out the teachings of her risen Lord, teaches us what it means to live in the unity of Christ: *Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.* Not a bad three-point sermon. Be humble; give you anxiety to God; keep alert, for the evil one still lurks. In humility, we remember that we live only by God's grace, the same grace that extends to others. In laying our anxieties at the foot of the cross, we find peace in the midst of all things. In the discipline that remembers that the devil still prowls, we find ourselves centered in the cross that has claimed us. We begin to live toward one another with grace, finding peace in the unity that first found us. So much of our disunity comes from a lack of humility and an abundance of anxiety. The gospel gifts us with more of one and less of the other, and that's more than enough to push back against the devil and his empty promise that we can solve the world's problems on our own. Keep alert, friends. Alert to the work of Jesus, the One who died for our sake, who lives to bring us as one into the very life of the Triune God.
  
6. I had to laugh the other day. I was reading a commentary on these texts that had been prepared before the pandemic arrived. The author wrote, "Our

pews are full of people with that longing” for God to accomplish something new. Who could have foreseen that our pews wouldn’t be full of people? Still, the author is right. Our pews are now chairs at the kitchen table, couches in the living room, but we *are* filled with longing. For peace. For hope. For togetherness. For an end to the pandemic and a return to something resembling normal. We pray that the new normal will not simply be a return to past, but a better world. As we find our way forward, there are certainly right answers to be found, truth to be distinguished from falsehood. Not every point of view is equally valid. I’ve got it all figured out, of course; buy me a beer some time and I’ll tell you all about it. But in all seriousness, the way into this truth will only be found when we claim the truth that we are united as one, drawn together as the people of God through the death of Jesus Christ.

7. In between his last supper and his death, Jesus prays for us. For unity and protection. Then he goes to the cross to gift with both. We, too, are in an in-between time, held in stasis between the old that was and the new that is emerging. Pray, church, and remember that Christ prays for you. The gifts and the promise are received. Neither disagreement nor distance can keep us apart. As the people of God, live in unity of purpose for the sake of the world that needs the gifts of Jesus more than ever. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.

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