

Our gospel reading for today—on this, the 7th (and last) Sunday of the Easter season—closes out Jesus’ “farewell discourse” to his disciples.

Even though we celebrated Easter way back in the middle of April, we have (for the past several weeks) gone back before Easter in our gospel readings... to Jesus’ last meal with his disciples—listening in on his final teachings and promises... and here, his high-priestly prayer.

In other words, the setting of this reading is Thursday night—Maundy Thursday—the night on which Jesus will be betrayed and handed over to his enemies... denied and deserted by his friends... tried, convicted and ultimately crucified.

Jesus knows all that is to come, so he gathers his closest friends... and (over the course of 3 chapters) offers them parting words of instruction, encouragement, and hope... preparing “his own” for what is to come... for what they are to become in the world. **If you happen to have a red-letter edition of the bible—you know, the one that has Jesus’ words printed in red—these 3 chapters are almost ALL red!

It is an impossible task... trying to prepare his friends for what lies ahead. They can’t really *grasp* what is happening... maybe they can’t even *hear* what he’s trying to tell them through their emotion... their fear and confusion. [You know how hard it is to hear / comprehend... when emotions are running high].

So, once Jesus has said all that they can bear, he promises them that the Advocate—the Holy Spirit—will come to them... and be with them... to remind them of everything he has said / taught... to lead them into all truth.

And then he does one more thing. He prays for them! (And we get to hear him!)

He prays that they will be able to endure the challenges that come their way.

He prays that they will discover strength in their unity.

He prays that they will be drawn together “as one”... just as Jesus and the heavenly Father are “one.”

But notice – he doesn’t stop there. Jesus then extends his prayer... beyond them... beyond that room / that city / that time and space... to us!

“I ask not only on behalf of these,” Jesus prays, “but also on behalf of those who will come to believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.”

Can you imagine?

On the night of his impending arrest, suffering, and death... Jesus turns his attention to us! He actually prays for us!

And not just us... he prays for ALL those *who will come to believe* through the testimony of his disciples—the generations before us (including those who shared the good news of the gospel with us)... and the generations after us... *who will come to believe* through our testimony (through our sharing of the good news of the gospel)... that they—WE—may all be one.

2000 years ago...as Jesus gathered with his disciples for the last time before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus prayed for his disciples... and then he prayed for us—for you and me! Isn’t that incredible?!

We only get to hear the end of Jesus' prayer in today's gospel reading. The entire 17th chapter is Jesus' prayer (divided out over the 3-year cycle of the lectionary). It's called a "priestly" prayer because in it, Jesus intercedes for others (for us) before God... as a priest would.

How powerful it is that Jesus prayed to God on our behalf... that there is, in fact, no one for whom Jesus did not pray on his last night.

What his prayer reveals... is Jesus' deep love for his disciples... for you and me!

A few years ago, I was at a pastor's gathering... and at the end of our time together, we split up into small groups of 3 or 4... shared some of what was going on in our personal / professional lives (the joys and the struggles / challenges)... and then we prayed for one another – one at a time.

To be honest, I was much more comfortable when I was doing the praying... at least I had something to do. Being prayed for... with nothing to do but receive the prayers of others... felt strange / uncomfortable. I'm not used to that! I'm usually the one doing the praying... for others! BUT it was incredibly powerful! And humbling! And affirming! It was a reminder that I am not alone... that others are there to support me / care for me...

That is what Jesus does here! He prays for his disciples!

- He senses the depth of their fear and confusion... and so he prays for them.
- He knows they can't bear any more teaching (any more *words*)... so he prays for them.
- He knows that he will soon leave them / they'll be on their own... so he prays for them.

And as he does—whether they understand everything he says or not—he tells them that they do not have to do everything / even understand everything... he tells them that he is there to support them / that they are not alone... he tells them that they are loved / valued.

And what does Jesus pray for – as he thinks about his disciples... and us... and all his other followers in this and every generation? Three things: 1) oneness, 2) love, and 3) belief.

- **Jesus prays** "...that they may be one" (as he is one with the Father)... that WE may be one—one with each other... one with Jesus and the Father... and that being one, we may have peace.
- **Jesus prays** that God's love will be in us (as it was in Jesus)... and that our one-ness with each other would grow out of the love of God.
- **Jesus prays** that through our witness—of one-ness and love... for God and for one another—the world will come to believe.

Notice how this picks up what Jesus said back in chapter 13: "*This is how all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for each other.*"

Maybe Jesus saves this prayer for last... because he knows that the unity of his followers will be what we struggle with most... because he knows we need it!

As with any relationship, unity / one-ness cannot be forced... or bullied... or manipulated; But in a divided world where the divisions often run down so-called "religious" lines, there is NO excuse for Christians NOT to try to work toward the unity Jesus prays for.

After all, the purpose of Jesus' prayer for unity / one-ness is NOT for its own sake... but for the sake of our witness to the love of God.

The importance of unity among believers is that such one-ness leads the world to believe. The counterpoint of this truth, sadly, is that the world does NOT believe because what the world sees are divisions / partitions (even hatred) among the followers of Jesus.

What this whole prayer comes down to in the end... is LOVE—the LOVE of the Father surrounding Jesus... and that same LOVE surrounding all of Jesus' followers—making him present to them... and through them to the world.

5 times in these 6 verses, Jesus names LOVE as the key ingredient.

- LOVE is the key to Jesus' prayer for one-ness... and for the power of our witness to the world.
- LOVE is the bond within the triune God.
- LOVE is God's gift to the disciples... and to us.
- LOVE is the magnetic grace through which God seeks to attract the world to himself.
- LOVE is the key ingredient that Jesus prayer will be in his followers... so that we may be one... as he and the Father are one.

If we, Christians, were *all* to take such LOVE to heart—to truly live it...

- Would our selfishness and arrogance, our hatred and need for revenge, our divisions and hostilities melt away?
- Would we finally work together to bring an end to the violence and innocent bloodshed, racism and hatred that plagues our nation / our world?

If we were *all* to take such LOVE to heart—to truly live it...

- Wouldn't the Christian witness be stronger?

Dear friends, the LOVE that Jesus prays for... is a cross-shaped LOVE.

It is a LOVE that puts others before ourselves.

It is self-giving LOVE that is resurrected into new life—the only power strong enough to transform this world.

→What do we need Jesus to pray for today... when it comes to us—to our faith?

What would happen if we pray, "*Jesus, pray for what you think we need*"... and then trust Jesus, for once, to take it from there.

→And what would it sound like if we took Jesus seriously that he prays for the world—this world that God loves... this world Jesus died to save?

Where has the world's relationship with God gone astray? What would Jesus pray for?

- An end to the vitriol / the hate-filled rhetoric so carelessly thrown around

- An end to our love for guns / wealth / power... over our love for one another
- The courage to stand up / take action where it is needed... to speak truth / confront the lies... to tear down the walls that divide
- Our unwillingness to even try to work together for the good / well-being of ALL
- Our complicity in evil – in all its shapes / forms... turning a blind eye to discrimination and injustice...
- Our unwillingness to see Christ in each other

→What would we overhear Jesus' praying for—for us... for this world in which we live – today?

Keep your prayers coming, Jesus! We need them as much today as ever.

We're never NOT going to need them. Our hope... our future... lies in YOU alone!