

Easter 7C 2022

Sunday After Ascension

Rev. Doug Floyd

Acts 16:16-34, Psalm 47, Revelation 22:10-21, John 17:20-26

In John 17 Jesus prays for His disciples. Though this story is set before the cross and resurrection, we are reading it on the Sunday after the Ascension. This day is usually focused on commissioning stories. Just as Matthew and Luke have commissioning stories, this prayer can be understood in light of Jesus' commission to His disciples and those who come after His disciples. It is a fitting meditation on the day the Whitmires prepare to leave for Chattanooga, that we meditate upon the Lord's commission to His disciples.

Jesus is addressing us today and praying for us today that we might know the love He shares with the Father and that we might participate in this great love between one another, and that we might reveal this love to the world.

To get a sense of this great priestly prayer of John 17, we might back up to John 13 as Jesus talks with His disciples, shares a meal, and blesses them. Francis Moloney describes this group of disciples as fragile.¹ We might think of these earliest followers of Christ as "Fragile Disciples in a Hostile City on a Mission from God."

As they come to this supper, the disciples can sense the tension in the city. They do not understand what is about to take place, but they have a sense of foreboding. We see it in the stories prior. Even in the story of raising Lazarus where Thomas suggests that as they go to Lazarus they may die with him.

At the last supper, Jesus speaks and ministers peace to His disciples even as He challenges them to abide in Him and to love one another as He as loved them. Jesus also speaks of the difficulties to come. He says,

"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."²

Jesus tells them that in a little while they will see Him no longer and this will cause great distress. He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy."³

These fragile disciples are troubled in heart and mind. We know that within hours, Jesus will be captured and face man's judgment. The trial and crucifixion will terrify the disciples and they will run away. They had anticipated Jesus establishing His kingdom, and they would help serve Him in this new kingdom. But instead, the whole project appears to be failing. And they are failing. They thought they were prepared to follow Jesus even unto the death, but they cannot. The events at hand terrify and immobilize them.

I have often felt like a weak and fragile disciple. Richard Wurmbrand came to our church when I was a child. The stories of his persecution terrified me. I never wanted to serve as a missionary or a pastor. I was too afraid. That weakness was not simply a passing childhood struggle. I've

¹ Francis J. Moloney, *Glory Not Dishonor: Reading John 13–21* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 114. "Jesus asks the Father to care for his fragile disciples by gathering them into all that can be known of the reality of God (*tērēson autous en tō onomati sou*), creating a unity among them, repeating the oneness that has always existed between Jesus and the Father."

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 16:2.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 16:20.

gone through times of dark depression and fear. I would feel as though my faith was simply slipping away. And yet, here I am. The Lord did not abandon me in these valleys of death. He kept calling me back to life, to hope, to peace.

Though we may be weak and fragile, He is greater than our weakness and our frailty. His faithfulness sustains us even when we feel like we're sinking down and down. He raises us up by His grace and makes known to us the riches of His grace.

In our story today, these weak disciples are sent into a hostile city. They face King Herod, an unjust ruler who beheaded John the Baptist and would later behead the Apostles James. They face religious authorities who will seek to silence them through beatings, jail, and even stonings. Stephen is stoned to death for preaching the Gospel. They face a Roman power whose method of dealing with those who cause trouble is crucifixion. This form of execution is horrific. It is sexually exploitive as victims are stripped naked and hung for all the world to see. In the crucifixion of Christ, we see Roman soldiers beating and mocking Him. The death on the cross is a slow arduous death that can sometimes take days.

The disciples grew up around crucifixions and trembled at the mere thought. Victims were humiliated, broken, and left hanging as a sign to all people that you do not oppose Rome at any level. Jesus has sent His disciples into a city, an empire that will eventually kill most of them.

They are on a mission from God. Unlike the Blues Brothers who are "on a mission from God" to save their children's home. These disciples are commissioned to go out into foreboding world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

They are facing hostilities as they are bearing witness to the character of God the Father, which is what Jesus is prayer is about. He has revealed the character of the Father to the disciples, and He prays that the disciples will reveal the same character. As they reveal Jesus, they will be revealing the God who is good, who is faithful, and who is loving.

Now, when we read this, we think about our own culture, it's hard to say that we are sent out into a hostile city. I certainly don't think Maryville is a hostile city. I don't think we're in danger of being crucified or suffering the kind of torment like Richard Wurmbrand experienced, but we do face some level of cultural rejection. And this can be discouraging. It might be easy for Christians to feel misunderstood by the society at large.

We need the power of the Holy Spirit to be faithful witnesses. As we read the story of the disciples in Acts, we see fragile men and women transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. These once weak and frail people, stand up in the face of threats. They continue to proclaim the gospel of Christ, and even rebuke the powers that be. The disciples that once ran away in fear, become living witnesses. The word witness in Greek is martyr. So they are witnesses, they will die for the witness to the Gospel, the witness to the goodness of God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the disciples and their followers, many of them will be stoned, being tortured and killed. And yet, they'll continue to shine out as images of God, very witnesses to God's faithfulness in Christ Jesus.

Now, this doesn't mean they're perfect, because even after the power of the Holy Spirit, we know that people have disagreements and challenges. At the same time, they are growing up into Christ. They are becoming living images of love. In fact, it's because of the disciples who have become the very image of Christ, that were even here today. If they had been unfaithful,

we would have never heard the gospel. But it's because of their faithfulness, and the faithfulness of the next generation, and the next generation, and so on.

Christ's prayer echoes from generation to generation, and we are here worshipping Him. So how do we live into this calling, this commissioning? We recognize our fragility, our weakness. It is not our willpower to stand up for Christ. It is the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord empowers us. In today's Gospel, Jesus prays for us. He doesn't pray for boldness or strength. He prays for love. He prays that we would be united in love, even as he and the Father are one.

We are strengthened to bear witness to him by sharing in the love of the Triune God. That's the mystery of this John 17 prayer, because Jesus is praying what you might call a cross-shaped love. If you think of his love, his life completely poured out, obviously, for us, but also poured out in love toward the God the Father. This is a continual pouring out between the Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus is calling us to live in that kind of love. We are called to pour out our lives in love to one another as an act of worshipping the Father.

And that kind of love is only possible by the power of the Spirit. So we pray, you know that we might we ourselves might be empowered by the Spirit, that the Lord might teach us the way of humility, of service of healing grace, that he might fill us with His love and raise us up as witnesses to his faithfulness, His holiness, His glory. Amen.