

Seventh Sunday of Easter – Year A

In today's readings, we are given three charges: to love one another as we have been loved, to make God visible, and to be *one* with one another.

I saw a delightful cartoon that is applicable to the scene described in our first reading today – of Jesus being taken up in a cloud. In the cartoon, God is speaking from outside the picture and says, "I will speak in metaphor so that the people can better understand what I mean." And a character standing in the picture says, "But what if later people look at what you're said and take it literally?" And God says, "What chance is there of that?"

This Sunday we are in a strange middle place – between the feast of the Ascension, which was this past Thursday, and Pentecost – which we will celebrate next Sunday. Episcopal priest Suzanne Guthrie describes these 10 days between the Ascension and Pentecost as an "imposed pause, the anticipation of the promise of the Holy Spirit." She says, "This annual observance in this most liminal time of the church year invites you to practice learning the skill of loving God and uniting in community at a time of ambiguity, uncertainty, and waiting."

What the church has given us to sit with in this time of ambiguity, uncertainty, and waiting, is more of the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus from John's Gospel, which takes up more than three chapters in total and contains both inspiring words and confusing ones. I can understand one of the lines from last week's Gospel passage, for example: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." In these chapters of John's gospel, we have Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and giving us a new commandment: "Love one another, as I have loved you."

But there are other parts of this section of John's gospel that seem less easy to understand, and today's passage falls into that category for me. Some people jokingly call this the "Higher math prayer" of Jesus, instead of the High priestly prayer. There's a lot of talk about being "one" – and a great use of the word "Glory" or "Glorify" - it can seem fairly unintelligible, frankly.

But one of my Scripture professors helped me with the glory part. He said that if you understand the meaning of the word "Glory" to be "Presence of God," it can help. And

in her discussion of this week's gospel, Biblical preaching scholar Karoline Lewis defined "Glorify" as meaning to "make visible the presence of God."

Taking those insights into today's gospel passage helped me. In essence, Jesus is praying that God be made visible in him – so that he might "give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Notice how Jesus defines eternal life. It is not some paradise in an afterlife. Eternal life is knowing God. And how are we to know God? Through Jesus, who glorified God, who made God's presence visible to us. "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do." Jesus is saying he made visible the presence of God by doing what God gave him to do.

In the next part of this priestly prayer, Jesus is clearly praying for his disciples – and for us. Some commentators have wondered aloud what it was like for the disciples to hear Jesus praying for them. It's as if he is simultaneously giving them instructions while he prays – kind of like the parent praying with a child at bedtime and saying, "and dear God, help Johnny stop beating up on his sister..." – I think the most important part for us today is in the last few lines: "All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them." - Translation: I have been *made visible* in them. In the same way that God is visible in Jesus the Christ, this same Christ is to be *visible* in us. But that's not enough. Jesus continues: "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.*"

John's gospel does not have any account of the "Ascension" with clouds and mountains. Those words, "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you," are John's description of what we call the Ascension. And here, in this High Priestly Prayer, John has Jesus giving us the same charge that the writer from Acts calls being his witnesses throughout the earth. In John, before he leaves his disciples and us, Jesus tells us to do three things: to love one another as we have been loved, to make him visible, and to be one with one another and with him, as he is one with the Father.

It is in Matthew's account of the Ascension that we get what is often called "the Great Commission." Jesus tells the disciples to go to all the nations and to teach them to obey everything that he has commanded them. It is up to us, of course, to remember that

the only real commandment Jesus gave was this: “Love one another.” And where do we find that commandment? In the Gospel of John.

I think the accounts of the Ascension in Acts and in Matthew are easier for us. We don’t really want to *follow* that great commission of course – to be Christ’s witnesses to all the earth - because that sounds like *evangelism*. But at least we think we can understand it.

The Gospel of John, though, cuts through those metaphors. There, Jesus tells us to love one another, to make him visible, and to be *one* - with one another, as we are one in him. That is the “evangelism” John understands Jesus to be demanding of us.

The point of each of these three commissions we receive from Jesus is for us to continue to carry out *his* mission, which was to make God visible, to *be* the Love that is God – in visible form. It is now for us to be the hands and feet of Christ, yes, and to *be one*.

The commission, the instructions, the charge we are given by Jesus – to which we have already given our consent in our baptismal promises, by the way – take on different meaning in different times perhaps. Our understandings change and grow. We no longer think that it was a good thing to force indigenous children to leave their families so we could make them “Christian” or to tell African Americans that only certain parts of the bible applied to them. So what do these instructions mean for us today? How are we to make God visible, how are we to be one, *today*?

UCC clergy Martha Spong, much less far-out cousin of Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, wrote this in her commentary on today’s gospel. “We cannot all be one—we cannot realize the prayer of Jesus—unless we believe that all people matter equally to God. To do so requires us to shift our motivation from determining what is good for a narrowly defined ‘us’ toward considering all people as part of the ‘one.’”ⁱ

She goes on to say, “Imagine a world in which we live this way all the time—not only when the privileged are endangered but also when only the marginalized are at risk. Then we might inhabit the kind of reality for which Jesus prays with his followers just before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. If we believe God has the power to make it so but does not accomplish that oneness through God’s own actions, we must believe God waits for *us* to respond to this call to action.”

In other words, as I said last week, if we want God to help our neighbors or the sick or the unemployed or those who lost their homes in the floods in Midland; if we want God to somehow heal our sick society and our hateful divisions, we need to be who we are: the Body of Christ.

Soon, as we sing – or listen to Chase sing – about “when Christ was lifted from the earth,” let us remember how Christ made God visible to us, and pray for the grace to do the same. Let us, as Suzanne Guthrie urged, “practice learning the skill of loving God and uniting in community at a time of ambiguity, uncertainty, and waiting.”

May it be so.

- [Acts 1:6-14](#)
- [1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11](#)
- [John 17:1-11](#)
- [Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36](#)

ⁱ Spong, M. (2020, May 20). We can't all be one until we believe that all people matter equally to God. *Christian Century*. Retrieved from <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/may-24-easter-7a-john-171-11>