

Easter 7 Year B 2009

Texts: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” John 17:18

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

About a year ago I gave a sermon on the Lord’s Prayer. I told you at that time that the disciples didn’t ask Jesus for a specific prayer, but that he teaches them how to pray. I said that the real Lord’s Prayer was all of the 17th Chapter of John. And so we come to that reading this morning, the seventh Sunday after Easter, the Sunday after the Ascension, the Sunday before Pentecost.

This prayer to God comes during the Last Supper. Jesus has just washed the disciple’s feet and has tried to prepare them for his leaving. In a few, short hours Jesus will be betrayed by Judas, mocked by the Roman soldiers and the high priests of the Temple, denied by Peter, tried by Pontius Pilate and crucified.

Jesus tells his confused followers that this is His moment of glory; this is the reason He was born and through the horrible and humiliating events that are about to occur God’s glory will be revealed to all people.

Jesus turns from addressing the disciples and is speaking directly to God. This prayer, meant to be overheard by them, is also meant to be overheard by us. This prayer that Jesus prays isn’t just for believers of the first century, they are spoken for us in the 21st. century. The amazing thing about this prayer is that we are privy to an intensely intimate encounter between Jesus and God. We overhear Jesus praying for us, interceding for us.

Just as Jesus will be lifted on the cross, Jesus lifts the disciples, and all the disciples that have followed since, up to God. Jesus gives back to God, entrusts to God that which first was entrusted to Him...God’s most precious creation of humanity.

Jesus prepares the disciples for his leaving. He soon will no longer be among them. He knows that he has loved and protected them and now it is time to let them go. It is time to leave them and let them become what God has wanted for them since the beginning of time. The message of God's love in Jesus has been given to them and now it is time for them to pass it on. To do this, they will need protection from a world that does not understand God's message of love; a world that will work day after day in a way that is directly contrary to that message.

Jesus doesn't ask that all his followers be allowed to leave the earth as He is about to. He asks for something much more difficult; He asks that while they go through life proclaiming his name and His message, that God will protect them from the evil they will encounter. Not that they won't meet that evil face to face, but that they will endure the evil they most certainly will meet.

“As you have sent me into the world, so have I sent them into the world.”

A few days ago I passed our neighbors house directly to the west of the church. Ken and Lisa were outside setting up for a party. They have a son who has just graduated from Virginia Tech. There was a Virginia Tech flag on the garage and Virginia Tech balloons flying from the mailbox. They were celebrating their last son's graduation from college and they were getting ready to launch him into the world and into his chosen profession.

It didn't seem that long ago that David and I were preparing to send Christopher off to Valparaiso University. As we see and hear about the graduations that are occurring it is very natural to re-imagine and re-experience the times when we launched our own children and grandchildren into the world. We are excited for them and at the same time who can't also remember the clutch in the stomach when we realize they will be facing a world with many, many problems and that they are going to be on their own for the first time in a world where there is tremendous violence, war, global economic recession, starvation, and humans degrading and using fellow humans in awful and sinful ways.

Erma Bombeck, the American humorist, writes about when she had to let go of her children. She writes, “I see children as kites. You spend a lifetime trying to get them off the ground. You run with them until you’re both breathless-they crash-they hit the rooftop-you patch and comfort, adjust and teach. You watch them lifted by the wind and assure them that someday they will fly. Finally they are airborne: they need more string and you keep letting it out. But with each twist of the ball of twine, there is a sadness that goes with the joy. The kite becomes more distant, and you know it won’t be long before that beautiful creature will snap the lifeline that binds you together and will soar as it was meant to soar...only then do you know that you did your job.”¹

This is when we know that our children have graduated from being children to being adults, from being in need of shelter and structure to being in need of the courage and support that will enable them to shelter others and to pass on what they have learned.

I wonder if that is how Jesus felt. He had been with his friends and tried to teach them, in a very short period of time, God’s message of love and salvation. But he couldn’t stay with them forever. It was their turn now and they would need to take His message to all the corners of the earth. They would also need all the protection and love, all the courage and strength that God could provide to help them in proclaiming God’s revelation to the world. They, too, were coming of age in a time of violence, war, and economic uncertainty where the rich got richer and the poor were barely able to survive. They, too, lived in a time where humans used other humans in awful and sinful ways.

This time for the disciples was their graduation time. This was the time they were to leave the Master, leave their comfort zones to embark on a journey that would change the world. This was the time when the disciples graduated from being disciples, someone who follows, to being apostles, those who are sent out. They couldn’t make that move while Jesus was with them. It could only happen in His absence. Jesus promises them that they will have what they need in order to fly, in order to face the challenges ahead, so the world can know that there is a better way, a more Godly way to live and love and serve.

¹ As found in Sermon by Rev. David M. Canada www.lectionary.org/sermons/OTHERS/John/17.06-19_JesusPrayer.

Let's face it; being a disciple is far easier than being an apostle. Being a child with the security of the parents being right there is easier than being an adult and having to deal with the pettiness, anger, frustration, uncertainty, expectations and pressures of everyday life. But unless we leave that security we will never know what we could really do. Until we leave our parent's house, until we are sent out into the world and have the opportunity to make our own mistakes we can't experience life fully. It was that way for the first disciples and it is the same for us.

Being a follower allows us to sit back and take comfort in the security of our belief in Jesus. It is a time that allows us to learn the faith so that we may act on it. But believing in Jesus also means taking the next step from being a disciple to being an apostle. It doesn't just mean sitting in that security of belief, but risking that security. It doesn't mean staying put, it means being sent out, moving in new ways in order to reach new people. Being a follower of Jesus means being a leader for others where that leading will bring them into the knowledge and love of God as revealed in Jesus.

Dear St. Matthew's, it is time for us to move from being followers to being leaders. It is time for us to run with Jesus beside us, lifting us ever higher, as we go out to proclaim His love to the world. We will hit rooftops, we will get tangled in trees and bounced around on the turbulent winds of this world. But the wind beneath us, the wind that carries and comforts us, the wind that helps us to readjust and fly ever higher is that of the Holy Spirit-the presence of God given to us as a gift in the absence of Jesus. It is time that we graduate from being disciples to being apostles.

As we do this, as we move into the next phase of our life in Christ, there may well be excitement, although it may be an excitement tinged with sadness; sadness that things are changing, sadness that the past can no longer be the present, sadness that God asks us to ever evolve and become what he really wants us to become and knowing that it will be difficult.

There may be anxiety about making the move from being disciples to being apostles. We may wonder if we can really do what is being asked of us.

But know this friends, we have been given back to God. Jesus entrusted us back into God's care. Jesus asked that we know, as He has known, the love of the Father, that we be as close to the Father as He was. And what Jesus asks for, Jesus gets. We will know the same intimacy and love that was between God and Jesus. And in knowing that love we are promised and given everything we need in order not just to fly, but to soar.

It is only then, when we have taken the risk to fly, that we will finally know whether we have done the job that God has asked of us. It is only then, when we have left the safety of what we have known, when we have let go of the fear of flying that we can gracefully move from what was, into the miracle of what can be. It is only then that we will have graduated from being disciples to being apostles.

Amen.