

Text: John 17:6-19

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Linda Flatley

Title: Going and Remaining

Sunday in person in the chapel May 16, 2021

For the church to receive the Spirit, first Jesus had to leave and return from whence he came. Before Jesus goes to the cross to die, John gives a long lasting description of the last supper and our lectionary lesson today in John 17 6-19 is part of Jesus' farewell prayer on the eve of his death.

This prayer is the other Lord's Prayer. Here Jesus prays as we listen in and what we hear in his prayer is that Jesus is praying for us! Jesus prays for his disciples' present and future. He begins by praying for himself in a way that makes clear that he has accomplished all that God has sent him to do. Jesus is now ready to make the ultimate self-sacrifice on the cross and through the cross Jesus brings glory to God. He commends the disciples for the glory they have brought him in abiding with him and in him. This is no agonizing Gethsemane prayer. This is the prayer of a confident Jesus who in obedience to God has accomplished what God had sent him to do.

In the reading from John 15 from last Sunday, Jesus taught that "no one has greater love than this to lay down one's life for one's friends". Jesus doesn't preach and teach what he himself is not willing and able to do. Jesus gives his life willingly. Jesus' shameful, painful death on the cross is now the cross of glory we celebrate in Jesus' resurrection. We witness to resurrected life each Sunday when we gather for worship. And every time we gather as friends in Christ we celebrate Christ's presence among us.

Of course pre-resurrection these first disciples couldn't comprehend resurrected life at the Last Supper but God had chosen them and given them to Jesus to disciple: eleven ordinary Galilean working men. These first disciples had an Old Testament frame of reference for what Jesus was about to accomplish. They had to trust and believe Jesus to see and understand the new thing God was doing.

Here Jesus gives the disciples back to God in prayer: the new and improved disciples who have spent three years with Jesus. They are disciples and friends in Christ who have learned to abide in him, be pruned for service and become more Christ-like. Jesus is confident that they are up to the task and delivers them to God saying, "... because they are yours. All mine are yours and yours are mine." And if Jesus is going, in departing from them, Jesus' first concern is that the disciples continue to be cared for and protected by God.

This verse "All mine are yours and yours are mine." speaks to the relationship between Jesus and God, the Father. Jesus is one with God, they share everything

and enjoy an intimacy, a mutual indwelling, an abiding, one in the other, that is a pattern for all relationships

This is the same pattern with which Jesus has shaped his relationship with his disciples to set them apart for God's work in the world.

To sanctify means to make holy which really means to set apart, to separate out for a special task. Jesus' disciples *are* different because they've had the companionship, teaching and living presence of Jesus, son of God as their soul friend. God with them. With that privilege and honor comes great responsibility. They are now being sent out into the world by themselves.

When we leave home for the first time, off to college or to take a job in another town or country, it is not without fear and trembling because the world can be a hostile place. For the parent left behind at home it's just as scary. I grieved for days when my first child left home. Although we had made all the arrangements together beforehand and I was confident in the security of the campus living arrangements and I had friends in the area who would check in on her, it was still an anxious time. All that was left to do was pray... and commend my daughter to God's care.

Jesus prays for his disciples' continued protection knowing that the world will be hostile to their message and the evil one will be out to get them. We are not given the source of the original evil only that there is an evil threat that opposes the good, a spirit of adversity that blocks the path of truth. Through prayer and discernment we are given the wisdom to know when that is the case when the truth is not in us. The example in Jesus' case is the authorities in Jerusalem who will arrest Jesus that very night. Examples of a hostile world in our day and age are so many:

from masks to unmasking idolatries,
from living wages to deadly wars,
from human exploitation to human rights
from health care to no-one cares...

we all get discouraged at the little progress we've made towards peace or ending hunger. Even the peace of Jerusalem is elusive with Israelis and Palestinians killing each other again! At such times we don't feel like remaining in this world, it's exhausting. That is exactly Jesus' warning. We are to be in the world but not of the world. Jesus doesn't pray for us to be removed from the world but to remain in it.

Being in the world is tough going sometimes but God needs you to continue the work that Jesus began. Notice Jesus is not praying for the whole world here. World here means the "ones who are actively distancing themselves from God", rejecting God's love. Jesus is praying for his disciples, the ones who are being sent into this hostile world. They are the ones who need the protection prayers and it is these first

disciples and the ones who come after who will bear witness to the ends of the earth, who will accomplish God's mission of "so loving the world." For God so loved the world that God sent Jesus, and Jesus is drawing his line in the sand here. He prays on behalf of his disciples not on behalf of the world. His immediate concern is for the disciples because they are the ones who will further God's mission.

What does that mean for us? Are we not to be concerned with the whole world? Of course we are concerned with what's going on the world as the world shrinks in our day. And we have a share in the ministry of Christ that continues in this corner of the world in this particular church.

Our circle of influence even if it's a small group of 11 disciples, or a membership of 27 starts as a small beginning which can lead to greater things when we are united in Spirit and one with God. Jesus promised that we would do greater things.

As you've heard me say many times our relationship with God, our mission, the work we have to do is all predicated on prayer. Prayer is part of my personal mission statement. Two years ago we initiated the Pentecost 50 days of prayer with a prayer wall and praying for each other. A pandemic was far from our minds but when COVID-19 hit we were ready to continue the good prayer practices we had developed as a means to the end. And now here we are almost nearing the end of this deadly virus. Our prayers are being answered. Praise God!

As you examine your prayer life and spiritual growth over the past year does it bring you a sense of joy or are you not so proud of yourself and how you coped?

When we examine our prayer life remember that Jesus our high priest prayed for us. He prayed this priestly prayer on our behalf to God our heavenly parent. We are God's children and friends in Christ, sisters and brothers in love and have been prayed into God's loving care by Jesus.

The good news is that God is sovereign and we are firmly in God's grip. God will not let us go. God has gone beyond all we thought possible to break down the barriers between human and divine to reveal the extent of God's love which never ends. No-one is beyond God's reach.

Because Jesus is human and divine he is uniquely qualified to be the bridge between humanity and God. Jesus reveals God to us and who God really is. We understand God's character and nature as the Great I Am worthy of our worship.

In Jesus' voice we hear God's voice and in Jesus' deeds we see God at work. They are One in unity and love and we are invited into this circle and for those who are called and destined to be disciples we care and share this good news with the world.

Our prayers do not have to be like the high priestly prayer of Jesus. The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9) is our guide. We learn to pray by praying. Prayer is love and God loves to hear from us. In the ordinary times and the extraordinary times. One of our pandemic priorities is prayer which led us to open the chapel every day for prayer when we couldn't gather in person. We studied the Celtic Way of Prayer via Zoom and discovered that the Celtic Christians have a lovely way of prayer which helped us pray without ceasing. In the ordinary tasks of life, the saints of heaven accompanied them and were all around them. The Celtic Christians had a prayer for every little mundane task and prayed their gratitude for creation: that their cows would give milk, for the trinity, the three-in-one, to protect them, prayer songs as they went about their work, graces before meals, and blessings before bedtime "Matthew, Mark Luke and John, bless the bed that I lie on" is one of the prayers I learned as a child. In their lying down and in their going out there was always a prayer on their lips.

As disciples we are holy, set apart, holy, not in the "holier than thou" sense but in a way that means we will live *differently* in the world, separate from the ways of the world in order that we may lead people back to God, the true Source of Life, the Ground of our Being. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life that makes for peace and leads in love. To God be the glory!

For 40 days after the resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples continuing to teach and prepare them for God's mission to the ends of the earth.

Then Jesus left to return to his father in heaven. Luke writes "then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hand, he blessed them. While he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven".

We remain. Next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the Church when the Spirit was given to energize, enliven, us in the absence of Jesus' physical presence. We have joy in knowing the promised Spirit is with us. Amen.

Let us pray... Holy God you have set us apart to continue Christ's work in the world. Strengthen us now, give us good courage to love the world as you love us. We thank you for Christ's life, death, resurrection and return to you. We rejoice in the Spirit. Amen