

Easter 7

May 20, 2007

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The Gospel this morning is set in the context of a prayer. The Last Supper is over and Jesus prays for his followers. What we just heard read is the conclusion of what is known as Jesus "High Priestly Prayer" in the Gospel of John. This prayer reveals to us Jesus' central concern even as he awaits his betrayal and death.

As Jesus prays, the past tense gives way to the future and we find ourselves contemplating our place as God's people carrying on the work begun by Jesus and his disciples. We are the ones about whom Jesus is concerned and for whom Jesus is praying. "I do not pray for these alone, the disciples at supper with him, but also for those who are to believe in me because of their witness."

We who hear this passage today are the ones who have heard the witness.

We, the church, are now the ones responsible for the apostolic witness to Jesus in the world today. This passage is about us in a way that no other passage of scripture is directly about how you and I live out our faith. This is Jesus prayer for us. It is a concern about us that Jesus lifts up to God.

What Jesus wants is clear. Jesus wants us to be one with one another in a way that goes beyond a level of unity we tend to understand. Jesus wants us to have a sense of identity that defies what we would normally think is possible.

When we hear Bible stories read Sunday after Sunday we hear about a people who know who they are. The Hebrews, later called the Israelites, have a clear sense of themselves as a people. Their ethnicity made for a strong bond but it was their religious faith that confirmed their identity. When Gentiles began to join Jews to form "the church" that bond of faith grew even stronger. They were fused into one body as followers of Christ.

It is not easy for us to comprehend this unity. The spirit of the age in which we live is individualism; each of us has to make it on our own. Some of us grew up in large cities, some in small rural communities, some in other parts of the world, we come together from a variety of places to form this parish community. In today's world you know a few other families fairly well, your children's friends, perhaps the people you work with. Close friendships are not easy to develop and a sense of being bound in community is hard to foster.

But when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist on Sundays, we know there is a bond among us that is different than any other. If a member of this parish should suffer some tragedy we would immediately become a community in a way that we do not normally think about community. Not only would we respond by caring for one another but we would find that we speak the same language, the language of faith about the chances and changes of life and about death. This morning's lesson from the book of Revelation reminds us, "Blessed are those who wash their robes so as to have free access to the tree of life. They have entered the city through the gates."

Baptism is our washing. In baptism we are made part of the community of believers. We have been washed and anointed as God's own forever. The tree of life is afforded us in the Eucharist when we eat and drink in the city known as the church. There in the sacrament that unites us all before God we encounter the one who assures us, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.....I am the root and the descendent of David, the bright morning star."

These images made sense to people who were brought up hearing and reading the Bible faithfully. For those of us less familiar with the Scripture, I wonder if these words are not too fanciful for us and thus carry little meaning.

Let's go back to the Gospel of John and the Last Supper. Jesus has shared a meal with his friends in an Upper Room celebrating the feast of Passover. He has offered the blessing over the bread and wine as a reminder to his followers that he will be with them always. At the end of the meal he invites his disciples to pray with him. "I have given to my friends the glory you, God, gave to me, that they may be one as we are one - I living in them and you living in me." That is who we are. The baptized bound to each other and bound closely to God.

This morning that bond has us standing together in a very practical way. This is stewardship time here at St. John. In just a few minutes we shall honor those among us who have given of themselves and their time as teachers. These are folks who have put their faith into action by passing on to the next generation the stories of our faith.

We are also being asked to commit our financial gifts in the form of a pledge to support the various ministries of this parish. I suspect there are those among us who would prefer to limit their stewardship to words only and not action. But today, we as a parish are asking you to put your faith into action.

Why should anyone give anything to God through the church? What claim does God have or the church have on "our money," "our time," "our abilities"? Let me suggest an answer.

We are asked to give to the Church because this parish needs our giving if we are to be effective carrying on the ministry committed to us in God's name.

Recently someone called the parish office with a legitimate need. This person was asking for a very sizable amount of money. I said we were more than willing to do our part but I suggested that they find others to contribute as well. There was silence for a moment then this person said, "I thought St. John's was a rich parish."

I have heard that comment before. I have even heard some of you make a similar remark. Yes, we are rich. We are rich in people who care for one another, we are rich in enthusiasm with which we go about our ministry, we are rich in the Spirit and faith in God. Thanks to many dedicated people, we are rich in dollars compared to some other parishes.

We are rich in a way that keeps us poor. Our commitment to be a vital, active parish in the city of York means that your parish leaders work with a very tight budget. Every year the Vestry works hard to effectively and conservatively prepare a budget to support the ministry of this parish. Every year for at least the last fifteen years, we have counted on the generosity of others to meet our needs. That means that every year when the Vestry considers our ministry together, the need for committed and increased giving is strong.

I want to be specific for a minute. St. John's is privileged to be one of the largest parishes in the diocese. We have been and will continue to be a major player in the life of the Episcopal Church in Central Pennsylvania. That means that the Bishop and the Diocese ask leadership support from us. Our buildings are some of the most beautiful historic buildings in York, they require constant maintenance and repair.

On Sunday morning we have a wonderful group of children learning about God who loves them. We have adults wrestling with issues of faith and life. We have six couples, at this very moment, engaged with me in conversation about getting married this summer. We have people in the hospital and in nursing homes being ministered to by the clergy, the parish nurse and Eucharistic visitors. We have people engaged in a host of ministries to others in the community who perform these ministries because they know the support of this parish. So, why should anyone give

anything to God through the church, because we make these and many other things happen.

Finally, we are asked to give because we need to give. You and I are asked to give because it is one of the ways we can express our gratitude to God for the blessings we enjoy. We give because we need for our own spiritual wholeness to give thanks to God for life and all we freely enjoy. You and I need to give because we are bound one to another and are bound to God. We need to give so God's love can live through us and others might come to share the blessing which we enjoy. We need to give because giving is a spiritual matter.