

Yr. B, Easter 7
May 13, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1231/1253 Words

Lessons: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Psalm 1
1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

The Gospel according to St. John presents a series of 'last things' on the final night of Jesus' life. The Last Supper of Jesus with his friends...the last image of Jesus, describing himself as a life-giving, fruitful vine...the last commandment of Jesus, telling his followers to love one another. And, as we just heard, the last prayer of Jesus.

If you thought your next prayer would be your last prayer, what would you pray? Specifically, what would you pray for those whom you love most dearly? What would you pray for those whom you must leave behind? The gift of today's Gospel is discovering what Jesus thinks is most important. Maybe someday we will copy him. Maybe someday we will pray like Jesus.

"Father, I pray for those whom you gave me, because they are yours." Notice how Jesus recognizes his disciples as a *gift*—saying, "I pray for those whom you *gave me*." Likewise, we can learn to pray with awareness of the gifts we have received. And the crowning gift for many of us is the gift of those we love. For some—but not for all—Mother's Day helps bring this kind of gift into focus.

The second part of Jesus' statement is harder. He recognizes that his beloved do not belong to him, but to our Father in heaven. Jesus says, "I pray for them because they are *yours*." Likewise, we can learn to pray with awareness that our beloved do not belong to us. They are 'on loan' to us. They belong to God. We are, therefore, stewards of priceless gifts entrusted to our care.

If you travel Highway 25 in central Utah, that road will carry you through the middle of an Aspen Stand, A 106-acre colony of Quaking Aspen Trees. In the summer, the fluttering leaves signal every breeze of fresh mountain air. In autumn, those same leaves are transformed into a shimmering palate of gold. Like our beloved, the earth and all that is in it is also 'on loan' to us. It belongs to God. We are stewards of this priceless gift entrusted to our care.

Jesus continues to pray for those whom he loves, saying "Holy Father, protect them..." Now, in our eyes, Jesus seems capable of *anything*—healing people, calming storms, and even raising the dead. Yet, in his last prayer, Jesus asks our Father in heaven to protect his beloved. How ironic, that the most capable savior we know surrenders his power. Likewise, we can learn to pray by surrendering.

First, we pray by doing *all* that we are capable of doing...for those we love, for those in need, and for this fragile earth, our island home. We pray when we actively stand up for justice and peace. We pray when we actively speak out for the weak, poor and vulnerable souls whose voices are ignored. We pray when we act like stewards of the priceless gifts entrusted to our care. In other words, we pray when we act...like...Jesus.

At the very same time, we also recognize our personal limits. And, like Jesus, we lift up all that we love to the merciful power to God. Having done all that *we can*, we hand back to our Father in heaven all that we *cannot* do to protect, fix, solve, manage, or save, by ourselves. God is with us, working in ways more gracefully than we can ask or imagine.

Let me take you back to the Colony of Aspen Trees at Fishlake National Forest. I'm sorry to share with you the news that it is not regenerating very well. Before we shrug it off and say, "That's life!" try to fathom with me for a moment the span of a life that began at the end of the last ice age. Imagine doing all we can to steward a precious life that is 80,000 years old...while also recognizing that we are not all-powerful by ourselves. We depend upon God as much as trees planted by streams of water.

Jesus ties his last prayer together by revealing his purpose in praying for our heavenly Father’s protection—saying “protect them...so that they may be one, as we are one.” It is humbling to recognize that Jesus wants for *us*...the same unity he and the Father enjoy through the power of the Spirit. Such perfect oneness seems impossible to imagine, yet it is nevertheless the goal and purpose of Christ.

Here’s an image of oneness I want to bring into focus. If I were to ask you to name the largest single, living organism in North America, how many of you would think of a giant Blue Whale off the coast of Maine or maybe a massive Sequoyah Tree in the Redwood Forest of California? You would be wrong.

The largest, single living organism in North America (and possibly in the world) is that grove of genetically identical Quaking Aspen Trees in the State of Utah. Technically, it is *one tree*, sprouting up all over the place *because* it is 106 acres of common life rising up from a singular, 80,000-year-old root system that supports nearly 13,000,000 pounds of life...and beauty...and unity...*held* together...*nourished* together...and *secured* together by one hidden source....just like **we** are *held* together...*nourished* together...and *secured* together by one hidden Source.

Now, you can see that Jesus prays for us to recognize and trust that we are united completely...and perfectly...by what we cannot see—the root of our existence, a hidden, underground, ‘life-giving vine’ that creates and sustains our common and beautiful life...just like the common, beautiful ice age old life of the Quaking Aspen in Utah.

Next week we will begin our prayers by recognizing and trusting our unity in relationship with one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. But what I want to do today is draw your attention to our *last prayer* in the Holy Eucharist so you can see just how closely our prayer tracks the *last prayer* of Jesus.

2 Variations:

RITE 1: In our postcommunion prayer at every Eucharist, we pray like Jesus prayed. First, we recognize the gift we have received...(Almighty and everliving God, we most heartily thank thee...) Next, we acknowledge that we all belong to God...as we pray, (we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, the blessed company of all faithful people) Finally, we surrender ourselves to God’s mission of perfect unity, as we pray: (...assist us with thy grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in...)”

RITE 2: In our postcommunion prayer at every Eucharist, we pray like Jesus prayed. First, we acknowledge with thanksgiving that we belong to God, as we pray, (Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son...) And then we surrender ourselves to God’s mission of perfect unity, as we pray: (Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart...)”

So, when you think of what it means to pray like Jesus prayed, think of the unity of the Aspen Tree—a miraculously broad, beautiful, diverse, living, breathing organism...rooted and held together in a single source of unity, strength, and nourishment that is unseen, and yet undeniably real.

When you think of what it means to act like Jesus acted, think of how we are bound together with Him and one another in a common prayer and a common mission to help share, spread, and steward the truth and beauty of this unity.

The Psalmist reminds us what all this looks like—*what we look like*—when we pray like Jesus in thought, word and deed. The Psalmist describes the beauty of people united in God’s mission. “They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper.” Amen.