

Easter 7b. May 16, 2021. John 17:6-19.

If you'll follow me through just a little bit of nerdiness this morning, I think that it will take us somewhere. We are, right now, in one of my favorite moments in the liturgical calendar. The liturgical calendar is how the church keeps time, poled by Christmas and Easter, with the other seasons built around them and feasts, fasts, and other special days sprinkled in. In the church, we measure the year by how our worship changes as we remember different times especially in the life of Jesus.

This past Thursday was Ascension Day. After Easter, Jesus spends forty days popping in and out with the disciples, doing mysterious things in between restoring them, teaching them, and reorienting them for life after the resurrection. Then he gathers them together one last time, tells them to stay in Jerusalem to await the "promise of the father," commissions them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, and then is lifted up and disappears into the clouds. That was Thursday. The disciples then wait ten more days, cooped up in a room in Jerusalem, until the Holy Spirit comes upon them with fire and tongues at Pentecost, chasing them out of their seclusion and into the hurly burly world to preach the gospel, heal, and set free. We'll mark that event next Sunday, at Pentecost.

But today, we are just a few days past the Ascension. Jesus has gone, and the Holy Spirit has not come. Today, and all of this coming week, we are in between. With the disciples, we are in between the life that we have known and the life we have been promised. We are on I-65 in Indiana, going past those windmill farms: we've left someplace, and we are headed some place, but we are not currently at any place. We are on a threshold: in between rooms, but in neither of them. There is a quiet about these ten days, but a quiet that is somehow already pregnant with the noise and fullness that is coming.

This liturgical place, of being in between, just so happens to reflect where many of us are in our lives right now. It is certainly where we seem to be, here in Illinois, in the pandemic that has gripped our lives for over a year a now. It clearly is still going on, with dozens of people in our state dying every day; *and* the CDC sent all organization decision makers into a frenzy this week by seeming to say that if you are vaccinated, the pandemic is over *for you*. And just as many Americans are giving each other officially permitted high fives, the horrors of what is happening in India are getting worse. The new world obviously isn't here yet . . . but the world of the past year is fading.

We are on a threshold, which is not the most comfortable place to be, but can be incredibly fruitful. Poised between two places, two times, two dispensations, we are positioned to evaluate the past as we await the future. It is when we are no place that we can best feel where we are called to go. The liturgical calendar helps us name where we are, and calls us to be there. We have now a moment that is a kind of gap. We can inhabit that gap, stand on that threshold, without rushing into the next room. And on that threshold we can hear more clearly which room we are called to enter, and how, and as whom—if we allow ourselves to be there.

And on this threshold, in this place of liminality, of in-betweenness, our gospel reading today has us with the disciples overhearing Jesus praying for them and us. This reading from John threatens to pull us out of our timeline because it actually comes from the night before Jesus is killed. But there's a similar feeling: the disciples are overhearing a prayer about them. They are on the fringes, the margins of a divine dialogue, neither quite in nor out. I think of it in one way as something Jackie and I do for the "benefit" of our kids all the time. With the six year old sitting at the table with us, we might say to each other, "Now mommy, do you think Isaac

should do his homework before going to the playground?” It is a conversation with each other that is meant for the ears of someone else, an indirect address. For us, it’s a method of persuasion. For Jesus, it is a method of revelation. He is not pleading with God for the disciples; he is revealing to the disciples through prayer what he knows to be the case because he is praying both from and to the heart of God in their hearing.

And what he is revealing to them is that the good habits they have relied on are going to have to change. They have been with him, and he has kept them safe. Now he will not be with them in the same way and their safety will have to come through other means. But not through retreat: he repeats over and over again that the question is of their protection out in the world. They are headed for Pentecost, even if they don’t know it yet, when the Holy Spirit will chase them out into the busy dangerous streets without status or weapons—with only the good news in a world that lives on bad news. Being a Christian will be dangerous. God is now their protection and as we know from their lives and our own, that protection is not from being in peril or even from dying. They will have to learn to live without Jesus’ bodily presence, to *be* the embodied presence of Jesus. They will have to learn to rely on God, and that relying on God does not mean being free from peril or sorrow. God’s protection leads not to safety, but to sanctity.

Now let me be clear: I am not saying “throw away your mask and rely on God.” I am saying that liturgically and socially we are poised between two ways of being. We can sit here for a minute, just as the disciples had to do, listening and waiting. We know that whatever we are called to do or be, it will require us to rely on God and to be engaged in taking the good news of God’s life-giving love to a world that is desperate for it. We know that it will be new, and that the new is usually uncomfortable or maybe even dangerous, but that God will be with us. If we listen, the no place of in between is the place where God speaks loudest. Amen.