

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Acts 16: 16 - 34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22: 12 – 14, 16 – 17, 20 – 21

John 17: 20 – 26

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**“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”**

It is a segment of time set off by parentheses, this time that Jesus takes to say goodbye to his disciples. This time in which Jesus prays for his disciples in order to prepare them – and himself – for what lies ahead. Sandwiched between this last supper with his friends and his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus’ words are directed at God, but meant to be overheard by his friends. And the words are words of hope and promise. Words of faith and friendship. Words of continuity, commitment and community. We, the hearers, and the friends gathered around this table, are privy to an intimate union between Jesus and God. It is a hallowed moment in time as Jesus entrusts all of his disciples and the future of the Church to God.

While in some ways, Jesus’ words are words of closure, they are also the words of a new beginning. Rather like commencement addresses this time of year. Jesus knows that he is about to die, but his words are not those typical of someone knowing that the end is near. Rather, they are the words of a person on the verge of willingly laying down his or her life for dear friends and for the glory of God.

Jesus’ prayer implicitly includes the acknowledgement of death, but the focus of his prayer is on the future through resurrection and ascension. The words, limited by language, are a confusing mix of past, present and future. Nonetheless, they are unbounded by time and space so that they have been true since before time, they are true for the disciples who sit around Jesus, and they are true for us right here. They are words spoken in complete confidence and assurance. They are words spoken in outright boldness.

It may not readily occur to us that Jesus is actually praying for us – you and me – and not just for the men, women and perhaps children who are in his immediate presence in Jerusalem nearly 2000 years ago. But listen again to Jesus’ words: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through *their* word, that they may all be one.” Jesus prays for Peter and Thomas and Andrew and Mary Magdalene and everyone else present. But Jesus is also praying for those who will first hear the Good News through Mary Magdalene. And for the people who will hear Thomas’ words in India, and Andrew’s in Russia and the Ukraine, and James’ in the Iberian peninsula and be converted. And the people who will come to be converted in Rome because of Peter, and in Antioch because of Paul. And the people who will come to believe in Christ Jesus based on the words of those people, and so on and so forth on through the centuries, right down to you and me, right here and right now. And even beyond that to the people with whom *we* share the Easter faith, and the people who will believe because of *those* people. In other words, Jesus is praying for the whole communion of saints, past, present and future. We should hear this passage as if we, too, are gathered around the long wooden table which is laden with bread and wine, overhearing Jesus’ prayer. Because Jesus is praying for *us* and for those who will come to believe *through us*.

What does it mean to you and me to know that Jesus is actually praying for each of us and all of us together? I suspect that some of us might find it a little intimidating to be the subject of an intimate conversation between Jesus and God, but then, that is what we pray for Sunday after Sunday. To imagine how that would really sound brings it a little closer to home.

Take a look at the Gospel passage in your bulletin. Now imagine that every time the words “they” or “them” appear, it is replaced by your name. Or by your family’s name. Or by Trinity or the Episcopal Church. “I ask not only on behalf of Trinity, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that Trinity and all with whom they share the Good News may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may Trinity and those who believe because of Trinity also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to Trinity, so that they may be one as we are one. I in Trinity and you in me, that Trinity may become completely one...” It somehow becomes more real to hear the full impact of Jesus’ prayer this way. Try this with your own name, pray this passage several times, and see how it changes your connection with it. Because, you see, when each of us reads this passage, it *is* a prayer. Through God’s grace, our willingness to read this passage with ourselves specifically in it brings us into the conversation shared by Jesus and God. And we do, in fact, become one with them and with everyone else who believes.

It’s a funny thing about prayer. Prayer doesn’t necessarily change the circumstances, but it changes the person who prays. Or the congregation or the community that prays. Jesus is changed by praying as he readies himself for Gethsemane and beyond. Jesus’ disciples are changed by prayer as they are entrusted to the care and the will of God. The future of the Church is likewise changed.

In our first lesson from Acts, Paul and the others are on their way to the place of prayer in Philippi when they run into the young slave girl who is a fortuneteller. She, too, is changed by prayer as Paul casts the evil spirit from her. For so doing, Paul and Silas are beaten and placed in jail. But at midnight, as Paul and Silas sing their praises to God, the whole earth shakes at the presence of God, the God of Sinai, the God of all Israel. That leads to the conversion and baptism of the jailer and his entire household. Prayer changes things. But mostly, prayer changes us. Prayer helps form us into the community that God is calling us to become.

Jesus prays for all the believers, throughout all time and all places, to be one. To be in unity (not uniformity, but unity) with one another, just as Jesus and God the Creator are one. Unity. The root word of community, which literally means “with oneness.” The fact that Jesus is praying for unity implies that it is a gift from God, and not something that we humans can manufacture or manipulate. Unity is therefore a gift which we have only to receive. And we can only receive it if our hands and our hearts are open and receptive.

One writer tells the story of a congregation’s mission trip to Nicaragua. On the group’s final night in the village which they were helping to rebuild, the local minister and church leaders hosted a dinner. Afterwards, the local pastor announced that the church members would then sing for the Americans. The local folks sang beautifully through a number of hymns. In harmony. With multiple

stanzas. Without hymnals. As the writer of this story waited for the inevitable invitation for them to respond in kind, anxiety began to creep in. Not only were the Americans reliant on the printed page and hymnals, but at that time, the American congregation had four services, each with its own musical identity and preferences. Beyond that, there was the concern for inclusive language. So the writer pondered, given all of that, whether there were any hymns that the Americans could stand up and sing together. There was a unity implicit in the Nicaraguan congregation that the writer wasn't so sure was present in the American congregation. What about us here at Trinity? Would there be anything that a random grouping of folks from both of our services could actually sing all the stanzas, in harmony, and without reference to the printed page? That may not be the only manifestation of unity, but it is always good to ask the question, are we here at Trinity putting ourselves before God, with open hands and open hearts, to receive the gift of unity?

Let them be one as you and I are one, prays Jesus. One means in concert with, in harmony with, in unity. In a myriad of ways, we here at Trinity, like a microcosm of the wider community and even the world, are not identical. We are each a unique creation of God. Jesus prays, though, that we be one in God. That our united purpose in this world be to *ensure* that the world comes to know who Jesus really is as the Son of God, and to *do* the work God has given us to do in the name, in the spirit, in the unity of Jesus. Jesus prays that we are one in God in the way we show love for one another and for our neighbors. Jesus prays that we are one in God in giving thanks and praise and glory to God. So we join in that prayer, praying that we are changed and formed into the community which God is calling us to be.

Let us pray. Living God, Loving God: You are the source of all that is and all that is holy when it seeks itself in You. You are the bond that unites us all and erases all divisions. May we truly be one as You are one in us and we in You. Amen.

*(prayer by Miriam Therese Winter, in WomanWord, via Synthesis)*

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