

May 24, 2009 Memorial Day Weekend
Calvary Presbyterian Church
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Acts 1:15-17, 20-26
John 17: 6-21

The gospel lesson on this last Sunday of the Easter season is always from the 17th chapter of John. It is the conclusion of the intimate conversation that Jesus has been having with his disciples around the table. Jesus is closing the meeting with prayer. This is the longest prayer that we hear from Jesus. Purists insist that this is what should be called the Lord's Prayer. The more familiar prayer might be more accurately known as the Disciple's Prayer—the prayer that Jesus taught disciples to pray themselves.

This prayer from Jesus' lips is a prayer of intercession. He prays first for himself, and then for those closest to him, and finally for believers into the future—for you and for me. It, too, is a great model for our own prayers, although these specific words are Jesus', and his alone, to pray. Some commentators have seen this as Jesus' last will and testament, as he leaves everything that he cared about in this world in God's care. Others have called this the prayer of consecration before the sacrifice. Jesus is offering all that he is and all that he has to God, asking that the sacrifice that he is about to give will be acceptable; exactly what God had sent him to earth to accomplish. The lesson for this year is the middle section of the prayer. Let us listen in, as the first disciples did, to the words of Jesus in prayer. John 17: 6-21.

Who?

Someone called me this week to ask if I could fill in for her as the volunteer for the day at Arlington Cemetery. She was embarrassed when I pointed out to her that the sub list she was using had to be at least ten years old. I was a regular volunteer in Arlington Cemetery for more than twenty years, but it's been a while since I've had time to do that. I've probably been at more funerals than any clergy person in the presbytery—sometimes we did as many as six a day. I was there one spring morning when they had just opened the Tomb of the Unknowns. It was a major undertaking—both logistically and emotionally for the army. To move huge hunks of that marble, they needed gigantic, noisy equipment which disrupted the peace all over the cemetery. The potential to do damage to the tomb—not to mention the landscaping—with all that powerful equipment was very real. It was a hazardous undertaking.

In 1984, they had added the remains of an unknown soldier from Viet Nam to the honored remains of a soldier from World War I, and World War II, and the one from Korea. By 1998, however, the soldier from Viet Nam was no longer unknown. Forensic scientists had figured out it must be Air Force Lt Michael Blasse; and his family wanted him back. As we stood in the shade of those wonderful old trees in Arlington, waiting for a family delayed by the blocked roads that morning, the young men from the Honor Guard were distraught. They were always

distraught when anything interfered with their perfectly timed schedule for the day, but this was more than that. The events of the morning mattered to them; and they all needed to talk about it. They couldn't understand why a family would insist that they open up the tomb to remove remains that these soldiers had watched over so faithfully on behalf of the whole country for nearly 15 years. What if it wasn't Blasse? Would they put the remains back? Even if it wasn't, once they did the DNA testing, they would know who it was. There will never again be a truly unknown soldier, unless we choose not to know. Would it really matter if one of those honored dead was not really unknown? Some thought it was an unnecessary exercise; selfish of the family to demand certainty—what difference could it make? Could he possibly be more honored in a small cemetery in some town in Missouri with his actual name engraved on a stone? Surely there he would eventually be forgotten. For some of the young men it was a matter of principle. It would be a lie to call it the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier if one wasn't unknown at all. It mattered very much to all of them, but they didn't agree on why. For some, the purity of the idea mattered enough to go to any length to ensure its integrity. For others, the concept mattered more than the actual facts and it was a desecration of the tomb to remove what had already been sanctified. For them, those remains represented the sacrifice of all the others and needed to remain in the tomb where their memory could be guarded by the carefully numbered steps of the Old Guard—day in and day out.

Jesus' prayer was that he has done what he was sent into this world to do. He tells God that he has "made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world." All those "I am's" in this gospel, explaining more and more about the **name of God**, explaining more and more about who God is, making God's **name** known. God's original response to Moses, "I am who I am" (Ex 3:14), which in the Hebrew language, a language of very indefinite tenses, could just as easily be, "I am who I have always been; or, I have always been who I am; or, I will be who I have always been; or, I am who I will be; or, I will be who I will be." Our God is the one who just is—until Jesus comes to complete the sentence.

And Jesus had made God's name known—not to the whole world, but to these faithful followers—the ones that God had selected to be the witnesses. In their presence, Jesus has said God is the Light of the World. God is the Bread of Life. God is the Gate for the Sheep. God is the Good Shepherd. God is the True Vine. God is the Way, and the Truth. God is the Resurrection and the Life. Jesus just keeps saying, "I am." Jesus accomplished his task. He has explained all there is to know about God's name. Now, the disciples have received the truth, that Jesus was the one sent by God to show them what God looked like; to demonstrate to them how much God loved them; to **be** God in their very midst.

Until these disciples grasp that, the sacrifice that Jesus is about to make will make no sense to them, or to anyone else. They would mourn their personal loss and the loss of their hopes for the future; but **if** they don't believe that this Jesus was the one sent by God to be the savior of the world, his death on the cross would have had no meaning. For a good man to die, misunderstood and betrayed, would be, and always is, a tragedy, but it would not be a singular event, a unique saving act for us all, unless there were witnesses prepared to see his death and believe in his resurrection. Such a death had happened before and it would happen countless more times in the history of our world. Sometimes such sacrifices go completely unnoticed. Sometimes we can only recognize them in hindsight—it takes the lens of a different time to

notice. Most sacrifices are marked and remembered by only a few, as transitory as those flower covered markers on the highway where someone died in an auto accident.

Sometimes we do remember the sacrifices that others make. Hollywood has made sure that we will truly “Remember the Alamo,” maybe not very accurately, but we do remember that people died there and that it made a difference. But not many “Remember the Maine” anymore. When groups of school children see the mast of the Battleship Maine sticking up conspicuously on the highest point in Arlington cemetery, it takes a long explanation to tell them what it is, and why it is there. The Spanish American war is a tiny, unflattering footnote in American History books these days, and the 260 sailors who died in the Havana harbor that day are long forgotten. It was even more difficult to explain to tourists why the body of the Polish composer Paderewski was inside that Memorial—not that they recognize his name either. I haven’t been up there since his body was finally returned to Poland. I wonder if there is a plaque to remember the 50 years that he couldn’t go home—even after he was dead. How many years will pass before every one forgets that long, cold struggle?

Jesus prays for those who believe; for the disciples that he knew and loved individually, and for those who would come later. He asks for four things.

1. He asks God to protect them, to keep them from the evil one.
2. He asks God to give them joy. Remember all that joy we talked about last week? Jesus picks up that idea again in this final prayer. He asks God to ensure that his followers share the joy that he had in completing the task that the Father gave him to accomplish here on this earth; to share that joy that our God was willing to enter into this life to show us how to live eternally—free from sin—free from fear—free from death itself. That is what Jesus is praying for.
3. Then he asks God to sanctify them with the truth— and to set them apart because they are the ones who believed. They are the ones charged with the task of making meaning out of Jesus’ death on the cross and carrying that message of his resurrection into the far corners of the world.

In the first scripture reading that we heard this morning, Luke narrates the choosing of a 12th man to fill out this company of the apostles in the first chapter of Acts. When Judas forfeits his place among them, the disciples see themselves as incomplete. For Jesus to be the savior of the whole world, he must be the savior of all of Israel, and in order to account for **all** of Israel, they must be 12, one for each of the 12 tribes that came up out of slavery in Egypt to be God’s chosen people. All the lost tribes at last returned home, streaming into the presence of God, sitting at that table together, united at last from all the far corners of the world.

The reading from Acts tells us how their nominating committee worked. From the company of 120, they nominated two. It had to be someone who had been with them since the Lord’s baptism by John, someone who walked with them down every dusty road; someone who witnessed to all that Jesus had said and done. (These criteria always seemed to irk Paul, who over and over again affirmed that he, too, was an apostle, even though he had never known the living Jesus.) But, in Jerusalem that day, they selected two names that we have never heard before. They prayed over the two qualified candidates and then they cast lots. They threw the

dice and let God decide who the 12th official witness should be. (I wonder if this process would speed up the work of PNC's all over our church?)

Does this make you wonder about the other unnamed witnesses at that gathering? Who were they all and how did their witness affect the early church? Don't you wonder what their names were? Don't you wonder what ever became of the one not chosen—who was 'Joseph called Barsabbas also known as Justus'? Surely with all three of his possible names so carefully recorded, we would find a hint of his ministry somewhere else in the scriptures or in the letters of early church leaders. Not one line. Did he feel rejected because he was not chosen that day? Or could he say with real conviction that he was honored just to have been nominated? For that matter, we don't hear again of the man who was chosen. Who was this Matthias? And what was his contribution to the church? There are so many stories in the Bible about people who have no names; here we have names and no story.

4. Jesus last prayer for the disciples was that they might all be one; a prayer that seems to have gone unheeded in our history of splintered and splintering churches—the one holy catholic church of the creed is an uncertain memory; an ideal that we uphold, but refuse to work toward. When we ordain officers in this church, we ask them if they will further the peace, unity and purity of the church. Lately this phrase has become a call to arms, rather than an echo of this prayer that Jesus allows us to overhear. The Presbyterian Peace Unity and Purity taskforce met for three years. No one was satisfied with their conclusions. I think they found unity and purity to be essentially incompatible, opting for a truce in our bickering, which no one else wanted to hear. In this prayer, the only issue that we are called to unify behind is that Jesus was sent by God, and did what he came to do. That **he** was the one sent by God to save the world. His death on the cross was more than a tragedy, it was God loving the world so much that he gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

A friend of mine died this spring; a wonderful woman, who I will always remember with great fondness; a woman who shared all the gifts that God had given her with the church. You wouldn't know her name, but the contributions she made affected the body of Christ. She is a part of who I am. She was a part of the body and you were enriched in ways you'll never know by who she was. The world is full of unknown heroes; of those who mattered but whose names are forgotten; of those who contributed something to who we would be. Let's not forget any sacrifice. Let's not forget any offering. Let's honor them all this Memorial Day remembering that Jesus prayed for us to be **in** him and **in** each other—how much more unified could we get?