Bryan Hiott
St. Thomas's Sermon
Sunday, May 17, 2026

Gospel Text
John 17:1-11

There are certain moments when people know a good-bye is coming, and they start speaking differently because of it.

You hear it sometimes in hospital rooms. Or standing outside security at the airport before somebody leaves for a long trip.

At first the conversation is about ordinary things — whether they need anything from home, whether the flight is on time, whether somebody remembered their phone charger.

But then the conversation shifts.

And people start saying the things they really mean.

I'm praying for you.

Have a safe trip.

I love you.

I think there is something like that happening in today's Gospel of John.

Jesus is praying out loud in front of the disciples, and it's very personal. He is not speaking to crowds now. He is with the people who have walked beside him and loved him as best they could.

And underneath the prayer is this awareness that he is about to leave them.

“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world.”

I keep thinking about that line.

Because Jesus sounds worried about *them*.

I wonder what the disciples heard in his voice that night.

Did the room suddenly get quiet?

Did one of his disciples stare down at the table because the prayer suddenly felt *too real*?

Did Peter feel restless listening to him? Did John hold onto every word because he sensed this moment mattered somehow?

I don’t know.

But I think Jesus ***already knows*** how frightened and alone they are about to feel, even if they don’t fully know it themselves.

And honestly, I think we all know something about that feeling.

Some people are carrying grief quietly. Some are exhausted. Some are frightened for people they love. A lot of suffering stays hidden because people get very good at functioning ***while their hearts are hurting***.

And to all of that Jesus says,

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you…”

To know God.

The older I get – and I just had a birthday yesterday – the less I think faith is about having everything figured out. I think there’s a lot that I don’t know. And a lot that the Holy Spirit has yet to show me.

I was thinking this week about my Aunt Nancy, who is in her nineties now. She spent much of her life working as a librarian and has always been incredibly sharp and thoughtful.

And my Uncle Morris called me recently to tell me about a moment when she repeated something to him maybe five minutes later, not remembering she had just told him.

And it hit him in that moment that something had changed.

I have thought about that all week.

Because even as memory fades, there are still things deeper than memory.

Familiarity.

Love.

Recognition.

My Uncle Morris still sits with her. Still listens to her stories. Still cares for her with this deep tenderness that comes from a lifetime shared together.

Maybe part of faith is that too.

Not understanding everything about God but knowing the voice of the one who loves you. Knowing somehow, even in difficult seasons, that you are not abandoned.

Because there are days when faith comes easily, and days when it does not. Days when prayer feels natural, and days when the silence feels very long.

And I think that is part of why this prayer of Jesus in today's Gospel affects me so much.

Jesus is not praying for perfect disciples here. In just a little while Peter will deny him. The others will scatter in fear.

And Jesus already knows it.

Still he loves them.

Still he prays for them.

"Holy Father," he says, "protect them…"

Anybody who has loved another person deeply has prayed something like that.

Protect her.
Protect him.
Please let them be alright.

And maybe that kind of love — the kind my Uncle Morris shows my Aunt Nancy now as her memory fades — helps us understand something about the heart of God. The quiet decision to remain beside someone. To keep caring for them tenderly even as life becomes more fragile and uncertain.

I think Jesus is praying that way for the disciples here.

And then Jesus says this:

"That they may be one."

Not perfect people. Just people continuing to love each other, forgive each other, and stay close to each other when life becomes painful.

I think we see glimpses of that here at St. Thomas's all the time. Meals prepared for us after the service, or one taken to someone who is grieving. A phone call after bad news. Someone sitting beside another person who should not have to sit alone.

Most of it is in the day to-day-living of life, and it can be easily overlooked when we get busy or preoccupied – or, as a friend of mine once said, when life gets lifey.

But maybe that is exactly where the life of God becomes visible.

I think that is what the disciples were about to discover, though they couldn't possibly understand it yet – sitting there around that table listening to Jesus pray.

They would fail him. They would become frightened. Some would disappear into the darkness for a while.

And still Christ would return to them.

Still he would love them.

Still he would gather them back together again at Emmaus – and be known to them in the breaking of the bread.

In the same way, Jesus will gather us around the table this morning for Eucharist and be made known to us as well – in the breaking of the bread.

That is the hope of this Gospel for us.

That even in those moments when life feels fragile or uncertain, when we are tired or grieving or afraid, Christ does not stop holding onto us –

And he is there in our midst.

That is the comfort of this Gospel.

Before the disciples fail…
before fear scatters them…

Jesus is already praying for them.

Not after they become brave enough.
Before all of it.

Long before we know how to hold onto God, God has already been holding onto us.

Amen.