

## Not Alone

When our son Adam started kindergarten, he was excited but also a little nervous. It was a new school, and we had just moved into the neighborhood, so he didn't know anyone there. We took a family photo, attached it to a long ribbon, and hung it around his neck under his t-shirt. "If you ever get lonely or homesick," we told him, "you can take out the photo and look at it, and it will remind you that our love is always with you, wherever you are, like a big hug." He made sure that Shaffi, Tiger and Munka, his favorite stuffed animals, were *also* in his backpack, but the photo necklace was a great comfort in those first days and weeks of uncertainty. It was a reminder to him: you are not alone. Our love is with you. You are ours, and we are yours—love binds us together, even when we are apart.

Today's gospel reading is taken from Jesus' lengthy Farewell Discourse to his disciples, in which the Gospel of John concentrates most of Jesus' teaching. In the Gospel of *Matthew*, Jesus goes up on a mountain and delivers the Sermon on the Mount, to underscore that he is the New Moses. In the Gospel of *John*, Jesus saves most of his teaching until the very end of his ministry. Gathered with his disciples before the Passover, he washes their feet and begins to teach them. His teaching takes up multiple chapters. And in *this* chapter, near the very end of the discourse, Jesus shifts from *teaching* the disciples to *praying* for his disciples. The prayer is strongly associated with Jesus' ascension. One scholar has gone so far as to claim that "the prayer in some sort *is* the ascent of the Son to the Father. . . . the *spiritual* ascent to God which is the inward reality of all true prayer." This is all very appropriate, since this past Thursday was the Feast Day of the Ascension, and we are nearing the conclusion of the Easter Season, with Pentecost next week.

Many of our Easter season gospel readings have been taken from John, including last week's, when Jesus gave his disciples the commandment to love one another as he has loved them, and repeatedly urged his disciples, "abide in my love," "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." These words should still be echoing in our ears as we listen to *today's* passage, this prayer of Jesus that represents his spiritual ascent to the Father, anticipating the ascension that will follow his death and resurrection. Once ascended, Jesus will no longer be physically present with the disciples. And so he prays, "now I am no longer in the world, but *they* are in the world, and *I* am coming to you." He prays for his disciples in their hearing—it is a tender, poignant moment. He prays for their protection, "so that they may be one, as we are one." How, though, can they be one, when they are many? By abiding in Jesus' love. But how will they abide in Jesus' love, once Jesus is no longer present with them?

The key to abiding in Jesus' love has been given to them in everything that Jesus has said and done throughout their time together. And all of this is given in turn to the readers of John's gospel, who are also ushered into the intimacy of this moment. In order to abide in Jesus' love, in order to be one, as Jesus and the Father are one, the disciples are to keep all these things and ponder them in their hearts. And there is so much to ponder, so much they have not yet understood: Jesus the Water of Life; Jesus the True Vine; Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus who did not condemn the woman caught in adultery; Jesus who washes his disciples' dusty feet. Whenever they feel themselves alone and adrift, they are to take these things out, like the necklace bearing the family photo, to remind themselves: we are not alone. Love binds us together. And as they—as we—love one another, Christ becomes present again among us.

This is how we should hear the talk of “the world” in this passage: all this talk of the world, which hates Jesus and his disciples, and of the “evil one,” from whom they need to be protected, since they remain in the world, even though not of the world, while Jesus is no longer in the world. This talk of the world troubles me because of how it has often been read. It has been read in ways that harden a strong church-world distinction, that encourages those in the churches to identify all good things with the church, over against whatever they identify as lying outside the church—Jews, idolators, unbelievers, the sinful. There is a dualistic vision here, of us vs. them, insiders vs. outsiders, good vs. evil. And this problematically idealizes the church and those in it, who after all are ordinary, flawed people, and demonizes whatever is identified as “the world.”

But the world in John’s gospel is God’s beloved creation. It is the world that God so loved that he sent to it his only begotten son. The world is not fundamentally alien to God, and it is certainly not rejected or repudiated by God. The world came into being through the Word of God. This is the Word that speaks, “Let there be light!” It is also the Word that comes to the world in Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John makes the outrageous claim that we understand the order of things, that the universe itself becomes intelligible, when we understand Jesus. In recognizing Jesus as the Word made flesh, we recognize the glory of God, and this is to know God. It is crucial to recognize that “the world” is not just out there, not those people, not anything or anyone from whom we can cleanly separate ourselves. The world is *that in us* which does not yet know God, which has not yet recognized the glory of God revealed in Jesus. Indeed, we could say that *we* are the world when we hear this passage as affirming “us” against “them.”

Well, what *is* the glory of God revealed in Jesus? What *is* it to know this God? This glory is known in washing dusty feet, in not condemning the sinner, in loving as Jesus loves. Jesus knows full well that we are like Peter, who eagerly declares that he will lay down his life for Jesus, but who instead denies him three times. And yet Jesus declares to his Father, “all mine are yours, and yours are mine,” and prays “that they may be one, as we are one.”

This is not to say that we never have enemies. We are being taught here *how* to have enemies—always with an openness that they might become friends. So Jesus came into the world, a world that refused to know him, refused to hear that God is love and that God’s commandment is love, a world that bore him enmity, a world that was woven into the character of his weak and bumbling disciples. “As you have sent me into the world,” Jesus prays, “so I have sent them into the world.” Ready or not, they—we—are sent into the world. What we carry with us, like the photo necklace, are the words of Jesus, proclaimed in the life of the church: Love one another. Feed my sheep. Wash one another’s feet. Let the one without sin cast the first stone. When we are feeling alone and adrift, when we are tempted to boil our reality down into “us” versus “them,” to think that there is nothing of “the world” in us, it is the love of God revealed in Jesus that grounds us, reminding us: we are not alone. For this morning’s Introit, the choir sang Bobby McFerrin’s reimagining of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The piece was chosen, of course, in honor of Mother’s Day, but I think that it speaks equally strongly to this morning’s gospel. We belong to God, and God’s love searches us out in the world, and *sends* us out into the world, so that we might all be woven together in love:

Even though I walk

through a dark and dreary land,  
There is nothing that can shake me,  
She has said, She won't forsake me,  
I'm in her hand.

Jennifer A. Herdt

May 12, 2024

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19