

Above All Love and Serve One Another 2020
John 17:1-6, 11, 13-18 1 Peter 4:8-11, 5:6-11

John 17:1-6, 11, 13-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. ⁶"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹³But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

1 Peter 4:8-11, 5:6-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁸Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹Be hospitable to one another without complaining. ¹⁰Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ¹¹Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

⁶Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

⁸Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

In my early 20's, some friends and I used to arrange several
whitewater rafting trips in VA, MD and PA every Spring.
One time a group of folks came along who had never rafted before,
and five of them happened to end up in a 6-man raft with me.

Before we got underway, I went over the basics of river rafting,
and then gave more specific instructions just before a series
of treacherous stair-step rapids called, "The Big Nasty".

I explained that they needed to keep paddling hard
even while our raft was being slammed and spun by the rapids,
so that there would be enough forward momentum

for me to steer us safely through the right slots.

And once we were into the sudden drops and heavy rapids,
sometimes the back of the raft would completely submerge,
so to reassure that nervous and novice crew I would shout,
“We’re OK, just keep paddling, I’m still with you.”

The events and conversation between the meal in the Upper Room
and the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane
takes up a full quarter of the Gospel of John, five chapters.

And the prayer Jesus prays **with and for** his disciples that night,
goes on for an entire chapter,
so obviously, it must have been a very important prayer.

The purpose of the prayer Jesus prayed was to prepare the disciples
to carry on and after his death and resurrection,
and help them have some sense of what it all meant.

Jesus accomplishes all that through the prayer
that he intended for them to overhear,
which was really about promise, call and assurance.
“You’re OK. Just keep paddling, and I am still with you.”

This prayer comes at the end of his teaching and miracle ministry
as Jesus finishes the tasks the Father sent him to accomplish.
So he begins his prayer that night by describing the situation—
vs. 1 “Father, the hour has come...”

Jesus is declaring,
that this is the culmination of his life-mission and ministry,
the purpose and reason for which Jesus was sent, vs. 2 & 4
to give eternal life ... I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ...
I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world.

The point is that Jesus was sent, and came to save lost sinners,
and for three years Jesus traveled and taught that truth
about God’s gracious love and saving purpose,
enabling us to become **the children of God.**

And this prayer also circles back and connects to the beginning.

Do you remember how the Gospel of John begins? vs. 1:1-2, 12

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the
beginning with God. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ... to all who received him, who
believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

In this part of John's Gospel, all of that is now coming together,
as Jesus will declare from the cross, "it is finished"
which means, God's purpose for sending me is accomplished.

There are two very important truths that we need to understand.

First, his suffering, crucifixion and death are to be seen,
not as unexpected or as a defeat and loss, but as glory,
as a part fulfilling God's original plan to rescue us from sin.

And second, though it may have seemed that
the foundation of their world was collapsing... yet there is hope,
for God is still in charge and they had not been abandoned.

With those understandings, now the emphasis of his prayer
shifts toward urging the disciples to 'keep on paddling',
for they were to continue the mission and ministry of Jesus
of bringing and proclaiming the truth of the Good News,
the Gospel message of grace & hope to all of humankind.

Listen for how the prayer focuses on his followers, vs. 11~18,
Holy Father, protect them ... so that they may be one, as we are one, ... I have given them your
word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the
world.

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them ... They do not
belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent
them into the world.

With that, the prayer has gotten very practical and down to earth,
as it also applies to our own lives and living
and how by faith we relate to the world around us...

... and the message is,

"You're OK. Just keep paddling. Jesus is still with you."

Now over the next few hours and days the disciples would face
the most frightening and traumatic events of their lives,
and it was important for them to hear Jesus pray for them.

This prayer that Jesus prayed for them that night
was also intended to go much deeper **and extend much further**
than just those first disciples and their situation.

The prayer is also about **our hope and God's promises to us**
as we are called, empowered and equipped
to bear faithful witness to the Gospel word and truth

as the Church, the body of Christ called to serve
as the very real presence of God in the world,
and to use our lives well as precious gifts from God that they are.

Do you remember the movie "Chariots of Fire"?
It was about the life and faith of Eric Liddell.

In one scene, his disapproving sister is complaining
about his interest and great love for running and athletics,
rather than serving with her as a missionary in China.

Eric explains to his sister,
**"I believe God made me for a purpose,
but he also made me fast,
and when I run, I feel God's pleasure."**

Liddell believed that his athletic ability was a gift from God
to be used according to the purpose and pleasure of God,
which was the way he tried to live his life,
always for the glory and pleasure of the Lord,
even when he and his sister didn't always agree on God's will.

The way Eric Liddell lived reflects the message of 1st Peter, vs. 4:10
Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve ... with whatever gift each of you has
received.

As Christians, most of us already believe and understand
that our salvation is entirely God's gift of grace.

**But sometimes we fail to appreciate and neglect
our responsibility to respond as stewards of that grace,
and that through God's gifts and blessings given to us,
the Lord intends to love & bless others, through us.**

"Steward" is an important word and concept for us to understand.
A steward is not the owner, but manages property for the owner.

The steward is entrusted with authority and responsibility
as a trustee to use and develop that property
for the benefit and pleasure of its true owner.

Peter's point is that the gifts and blessings of our lives
are all given and entrusted to us by God, our Creator,
for us to use for the purpose and pleasure of the Lord.

And that service as stewards must also be held in balance, vs. 4:8

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.

**This is where it gets tricky and a bit complicated,
to allow room for love to guide every aspect of our life,
our response to circumstance and our relationships with others.**

The writer uses the specific Greek word, “ἀγάπη” here,

the sacrificial sort of love we call grace or mercy,

that places the welfare of others ahead of our own...

... which calls us to exercise our gifts and opinions with love.

We are given some specific examples of what that looks like 4:9, 5:6

Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God...

Hospitality is what practical & sacrificial love looks like,

and describes **Christ-like treatment toward all others...**

- that welcomes both stranger and opposition into fellowship,

- that strives to encourage and build-up one another,

- that with grace invites everyone to bring and share

their gifts and blessing for the benefit of all,

as God’s generosity, love and grace can then flow through us.

Clearly these are indeed difficult, confusing and troubling days.

The threat, anxiety and fear generated by the Corona-virus

is affecting everyone, some in terrible & devastating ways.

The life and culture we once knew and understood, has been shaken.

We did not choose to live in these times or in this situation,

but we can trust that God chose for us to live in this world,

and by God’s intention to deal with these circumstances.

The texts we read today assure us that

as we grapple with our changing world, situation and culture,

the Lord God is not surprised, at a loss or defeated,

but is still accomplishing according to his good purpose...

... and our call is to remain faithful, patiently-loving & steadfast,

to stay focused on Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture,

as we can surely rely on God’s promises, word and truth

and God's abiding presence among the people of God.

I am convinced that the message for us today is,

“You’ll be OK. Just keep paddling. I’m still with you.”

**So we are called to faithfully live out our Christian life
in whatever environment, whatever circumstance or context
God has chosen to place us, for us to love, live and serve...**
... and if it's staying home, we are still stewards, servants of God.

These Bible passages challenge us to consider prayerfully,
by our words, our deeds along with our attitudes & opinions,

- to ask **am I living the life of joy, peace, hope and discipleship
to which God graciously called, gifted and purposed me?,
am I using the gifts and blessings God entrusted to me?**

Am I truly committed to Jesus Christ, to the Church - his body,
or am I just another name on the membership roll,
**supposing that whether or not I live by faith,
it really doesn't make much difference anyway.**

**I doubt that we have any idea or appreciation for just how
truly wise, grace-giving, and merciful our God really is,
or all that the Lord might be able to accomplish through us,
or what a profound difference our faithfulness could make.**

One night, many decades ago two teenage boys were trying
to attend a revival service but couldn't find any open seats.
As they turned to leave, an usher noticed them,
and made a special effort and took the time
to search until he found some seats for them.

That night both boys accepted Christ and decided to follow ...
... and as it turned out, one of those boys **was Billy Graham.**

That usher probably never knew the difference he made,
and no one knows who that "faithful steward", that usher was ...
... well except that of course, God knows...
... just as God knows the contents and details of our lives.

Our church is coming to a time of making some difficult decisions.
The Session must with wisdom, faithfully & prayerfully consider
when, where and under what specific circumstances
we will open and gather for in-person worship again...
... which are a very complex questions that could possibly divide us.

Some are more than eager to worship in person again
and impatient about waiting longer to get back to normal.
Others consider it unwise & too dangerous until there is a vaccine,

and of course many other differing opinions all over the map.

**We live in a highly polarized, angry & distrustful world & culture
in which there is a broad array of strongly held convictions.**

And how sure, confident and determined we often tend to be
that our perspective, our opinion and views are the right ones,
but don't consider that someone else might be more correct.

Our world and our culture, they don't do

humility, patience, hospitality, listening or love very well,

so perhaps here is **God's gift to the Church:**

- **an opportunity** to be countercultural to the rest of the world,

- **an opportunity** to demonstrate sacrificial love, "?????"

that places the interest of others ahead of oneself.

I believe that there are wonderful and creative ways

that we can be faithful, effective and serve the Lord God well

by loving, serving and caring for other people

with whatever gifts and blessings we have to share.

I don't know when or how we will worship together in the sanctuary,

or even what our church programs and groups will look like.

But I do know that God is good, gracious, purposeful and faithful,

and that the Lord will reveal his will at the appropriate time...

... meanwhile, as we have been instructed, (1 Pet. 4:10, Eph. 2:10, 4:1-3)

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.