

5.29.2022 Easter 6 (Ascension)

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 16:16-34, Psalm 97, Rev. 22:12-21; John 17:20-26

“Jesus is relying on you”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In today’s gospel, Jesus talks about, indeed prays about, the purpose of the church. In his prayer, known as the “high priestly prayer,” Jesus prays about the unity and purpose of his church. This prayer gives us insight into what Jesus plans to accomplish through his church. A week before the festival of Pentecost, we are given insight into the purpose of the church and its work in the world.

Jesus’ prayer is profound, yet it is not easy reading. The difficulty in unpacking this prayer is in not destroying the mystery of its profound statement about the church. Perhaps this will help you understand my dilemma as your preacher this morning. We have gotten so used to living with sound-bites and predigested reporting on complex human problems and dramas, that we are often ill-equipped to enter into the profound mystery of God’s word. This morning’s gospel invites us to grasp the reality of the church Jesus is praying for without losing the profound mystery of what we are participating in. We must live this mystery in order to understand it.

In John’s gospel, it seems almost as if Jesus is speaking in code as he prays to the Father. In his prayer, Jesus prays for not only his own disciples, but for every single Christian who will live after them, and after us. Simply said, Jesus is praying for all who have or will believe in him.

Jesus prays, “*I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word.*” In saying this, Jesus makes it clear he is relying upon his disciples, and every generation of believers after them. Jesus is relying on you.

In his prayer, Jesus describes the goal of the work of his church, praying, “*that they may all be one.*” Jesus was about to be arrested and was praying that after his arrest, his Passion, and his cross, the ongoing work of Easter would be accomplished in the power of his resurrection through his followers – through us, his church. Jesus is relying on you.

Jesus’ prayer describes the ground and unity of the church’s very being. Jesus says, “*As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*” Jesus is praying for the unity of the church with himself and the Father. According to Jesus’ prayer, the church’s unity will not be established by its theology, its denominational organization, or by a so-called Christian culture; the church’s unity is only

established in its life together with Jesus and the Father. This is why this text is so hard; we must live in unity with Jesus and nothing else.

In other words, the unity of the church is not found in human traditions or theologies, but only by existing in and with Jesus and the Father. This is the profound reality of the church I am trying to express without losing the sacred mystery we must live within as Christians.

As a church, we proclaim our unity with Jesus and the Father, and with the sending of the Holy Spirit. How is this be accomplished? In our proclamation of the gospel and in our celebration of the sacraments, we point to the holy mystery of Christ's unity with his church. In Holy Baptism, we experience unity with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are present in the word and the water. In the Eucharist, we experience unity with the real presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine, which nourishes, forgives and builds up the church. This is why word and sacrament are the very center of the life of the church. The presence of Jesus liberates us to serve with him.

Jesus goes on to pray about his work in the unity of the church. Jesus prays, "*The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.*" When Jesus speaks of his glory, Jesus is always speaking about the work of his cross. For example, in John 13:31, Jesus says, "*Now is the Son of man glorified and God is glorified in him.*" Jesus was speaking of the glory of his Passion, cross and resurrection. Jesus shares his glory with his church – the glory of his cross and its self-sacrificing *agape* love for the world. Jesus is relying on us to share his love.

The cross is the glory Jesus gives to his church and to which the church always points. The glory of the cross is where we experience God's love revealed in suffering with and for others. The cross alone is the glory the church proclaims so that the world might come to believe in Jesus. Jesus is relying on us to proclaim the glory of his cross by serving alongside of him.

Just as Jesus prayed for the future of his church, the church also anticipates the future coming of Jesus. In the reading from Revelation, Jesus says, "*See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work.*" The church's unity and work is grounded in Christ, "*the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.*" As the church participates in the glory of Jesus' cross for others, the church anticipates Jesus' eternal reward for its work of suffering love.

What is expressed here is the awesome task and responsibility of the church in doing the work of Jesus in this world. Yes, we believe, are baptized and saved, yet this can never be mistaken for the goal of the Christian life. Baptism is the point of departure into new life in Christ's church. We

are baptized so that, sharing the grace and forgiveness we have received, we might serve with Jesus. We are to be Jesus' hands and voices in this world. Jesus is relying on you.

In today's reading from Revelation, the Spirit and the bride (which is the church), say together, "*'Come.'* And let everyone who hears say, '*Come.*' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." This is our mission as the church, saying, "Come, all who are thirsty." We are saved in the waters of baptism so that we might work in the glory of Christ's love, saying, "Everyone who is hungry, come; everyone who is thirsty, come."

This past Thursday was Ascension Day, a day on which we remember that Christ lives ascended and crowned in the glory of his cross and resurrection. In the Ascension, we remember that as Christ has taken our humanity into heaven, our humanity now lives in unity with the glory of his cross in loving service so that the world might believe.

Today's reading from Revelation ends the entire Bible with words of grace, "*The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.*" The Bible ends with the mystery of God's gift of grace that makes sinful human beings into saints sharing in the glory of God. This is grace: we believe and are saved, so that we might know the reward of serving in his love for others.

Each day, believe in the mystery of God's grace, and work to share the reality of Jesus' love. Jesus is relying on you. Amen.