Easter 7  "Last Words"  John 17:6-20
A sermon preached at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH on May 13, 2018 by Associate Rector Richard C. Israel.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O God, our Strength and our Redeemer.

For a number of weeks now, many of you, mindful as I am of my upcoming retirement, have asked me if I am counting the days. Until a couple weeks ago my answer has been, “No, there’s too much to do.” However, as the calendar turned from April to May—at the busyness and demands of Evangelism Matters, Holy Week, Easter, and our retreat with Brian McLaren—I wouldn’t be honest if I said that my departure from this wonderful community isn’t on my mind. This past week I spent a wonderful evening with our Stephen Ministers, with whom I have had the privilege of working so closely, reflecting on our shared ministry and my upcoming departure. Over the remaining days of my time here I look forward to doing similar meetings with other groups and individuals, too. There is still plenty to do in my remaining time here, but none of it is more important than taking time to say goodbye, which we sometimes forget is shorthand for “God be with you”.

Jesus in our Gospel lesson serves as a model for showing us how to “end well”. Jesus’ words recorded in the 17th chapter of John’s Gospel are known as his “High Priestly Prayer”. The setting of this prayer is the upper room on the night before Jesus dies. He and the disciples have just finished foot washing and sharing their last supper. Jesus knows he soon will be leaving his disciples to fulfill his mission and he wants them to be prepared. In this “Farewell Discourse” that spans 4 chapters Jesus teaches his disciples about his mission, destiny, and about their role and future in all of this. Now in Chapter 17, he prays for them.

David Lose, asks, “And what does he pray for? Not that it will be easy. He knows it won’t. This world is captive to a spirit alien to God’s spirit. It is animated by a sense of scarcity instead of abundance, fear instead of courage, and selfishness instead of sacrificial love. Jesus...offers an alternative spirit and reality. So Jesus doesn’t pray that it will be easy, but rather that God will support the disciples amid their challenges and that they will be one in fellowship with each other and with Jesus and the Father through the Spirit.”

The concern behind this prayer, the question Jesus is addressing is whether his disciples can continue to practice the love Jesus has demonstrated when he is no longer physically present with them. Scholars tell us that the Gospel of John was written about 70 years after the resurrection. Those who read it had never known Jesus. Most, if not all, of the disciples were dead. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed—a sign for many that the end of the world was in sight. Furthermore, Jesus had not returned and those faithful to Jesus faced persecution and despair. You can see why those who still believed in Jesus needed to be reminded that they are not alone.
As Jesus prayed for the protection of his loved ones, we can imagine how he might have felt. As any mother here can attest on Mother’s Day or any other day, as one gives her heart away to her children, she becomes vulnerable and suffers whenever they experience pain or loss. Jesus’ prayer, like the love of a mother for her child, comes from a place of deep intimacy with the Father. When he prays, “Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them,” his focus is not on information-giving, but to reveal the depth of God’s yearning to be in relationship with all whom he calls my “beloved children”.

But Jesus doesn’t only pray for his disciples back then. In the very next verse following this Gospel lesson we read these words, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. (John 17:20-21) That’s right, Jesus is praying for us, too. Jesus’ prayer tells us that you and I have a special place in God’s heart. Living from this heartfelt relationship we discover that we can experience abundant, eternal life, here and now, even in the midst of unsettling conditions.

To quote David Lose once more, “When we think of the Lord’s Prayer, we of course think of the prayer he taught his disciples and that we say each week. But there’s a way in which this scene gives us another Lord’s Prayer, the prayer our Lord prayed—and is still praying—for us: that we might find the strength we need and be one.”

Imagine, if you can, Jesus praying for you right now. In light of this other Lord’s prayer, what do you want Jesus to know, what do you need, what do you want Jesus to pray for? Is it for strength to deal with a difficult diagnosis or unending pain? Is it for discernment about where God is calling you to serve? Is it companionship at a time of loneliness? Is it for the ability to forgive someone who has hurt you deeply? Is it for help in overcoming a destructive habit or addiction? Is it comfort as you grieve for someone whom you have loved and lost? Is it courage to speak the truth in love to someone with whom you have a difficult relationship or to speak truth to power? Is it for perseverance in working for justice and healing? Is it to surrender your will to God’s will? How do you want Jesus to pray for you?

In the 8th chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul writes: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” The unity for which Jesus prayed is not of our doing; it comes from God. But in the power of Christ’s Spirit, we have a role in making God’s love for this world visible to others. Jesus prayed, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” In his prayer for us, Jesus equips us to live in the world without succumbing to its values and pressures, reminding us that all our days are lived under the protective care of God who can be trusted to bring life out of death. We grow more fully into the intimate relationship God longs to have with us as we seek to imitate Jesus’ sacrificial love for others, trusting that love alone can overcome the boundaries, differences, and divisions of this world.
Let us pray:  O God, we ask you not to lift us out of life, but to prove your power within it; we ask not for tasks more suited to our strength, but for strength more suited to our tasks. Open our hearts to every call from you, and over all worldly fears let your plans for us prevail; that in full surrender to your purpose, we may find our reward as instruments of your will and the messengers of your love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.