

*Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11*

*Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway*

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## When Jesus Prays for Us

I have been thinking a lot in recent months about life transitions. No big surprise there I know. As I mentioned a few months ago, I turned 65 this year. My husband Dave has retired and I am seriously contemplating the same. Retirement is one of many milestone transitions in life - one of those times when the shifting plates of life seem to be particularly active.

I know you are familiar with these places in life as well. If you are not in the midst of it right now, and we know that many of us are, then you have been there. Getting ready to graduation from high school. Having a child. Children growing up and into their own lives of school, marriage, work. Adult children coming back again. Adjusting to retirement and/or an empty nest. Or maybe the illness or death of a life partner. Job changes. Our own health diminishing to the point where we are having a very personal experience of learning the meaning of surrender, patience and peace.

And then there is the life we share together here. I am your transitional/interim pastor. By definition you as a church family are living transition every day. I am here to walk with you as you navigate changes in your pastoral leadership, and no matter the circumstances that is challenging and often difficult. You all have been through a lot and as you look ahead now there are still unanswered questions and uncertainties.

Today is Ascension Sunday. According to our church calendar, this Sunday always comes the week before we celebrate Pentecost. Pentecost is a joyous day. The birthday of the church. The Holy Spirit comes and the followers of Jesus are *on fire* with the power of the Spirit. They had a keen sense of who they were and who God is calling them to be -- messengers of God's transforming love, grace and justice. The church of Jesus Christ in the world! That is Pentecost Sunday.

We know that it does not take long for complications to come in, but it is still a joyous day worth celebrating.

Ascension Sunday though is not quite Pentecost. Through the years I have come to appreciate this Sunday almost as much as Pentecost itself, maybe all the more so this year. This is the day, liturgically speaking, when we remember, reflect upon and I think, sometimes at least, give thanks for, that which comes before Pentecost. Today is kind of the other side of the Pentecost coin. We must have the one to fully know the other.

This morning Amity led us in reading the story in Acts that precedes the Pentecost story we will read next week. It is the story of Jesus' ascension to God. According to the story, Jesus first promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit will come upon them and they will be 'his witnesses' to all the ends of the earth. And then, as they are watching, he is lifted up and disappears into the clouds.

When the disciples are standing there looking up thinking, 'What just happened? What do I do now?' they see and hear a vision, as clear as day, of two men telling them, "Why are you just standing here? He will come again." So the disciples return to Jerusalem to be together, to pray and to see what will happen next. This is a powerful cliff hanger, isn't it, with layers of foreshadowing and illusions to what has been, that make it clear that God is far from finished with us.

The second reading for this morning is taken from John's gospel and also often read on Ascension Sunday. As I mentioned earlier, according to John's account of the last few hours of Jesus' life on earth following the last supper when he is gathered in that upper room with his friends the night before his death, Jesus speaks for what in John, is *four chapters* of words meant for those dearest to him to hear. These chapters are often called Jesus' Farewell Discourse. Chapter 17, from which we read, is the final part of this discourse.

In the preceding chapters 14, 15, and 16 Jesus speaks words of comfort, care and direction to his friends. John helps us to imagine Jesus leaning in and saying, 'Listen dear ones. This is important'. It is in these chapters that Jesus says, 'Do not let your heart be troubled... I go to prepare a place for you.' And Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit and his peace. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid."

Here also we find the great commandment that Irene spoke about last Sunday in her sermon, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved

you” and more words on what the coming of the Spirit will mean. Jesus addresses their questions and fears as they begin to grasp the reality of what he is saying, that he will soon no longer be with them in the way they have always known him.

Transition. Uncertainty. In a very big way. And all the fear and anxiety and questions that come along with it.

And then we come to chapter 17. Jesus concludes all of this discourse and conversation with his disciples with a prayer. Notice the beginning of our reading from John for this morning, “After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father...’.”

Jesus prays. Think about what that means. No more does he turn to his disciples and address them. Now the conversation is exclusively between Jesus and God. The disciples’ only function is as those *for whom* Jesus prays. They and we, get to over hear this prayer.

Commentator, Dr. Gail O’Day, former professor of New Testament and preaching at Wake Forest School of Divinity, says it very well, “Jesus’ final words before the hour are not last-minute instructions to the community about what it should do in Jesus’ absence; instead, his words turn the future of the community over to God.”<sup>1</sup> What more could we ask for in times of transition in our lives?

Hearing this prayer not only reminds Jesus’ followers of Jesus’ and God’s love for them (for us). Jesus’ prayer here, at this time and place, models for us where it is we are to go when we find ourselves straddling those shifting plates of life.

Commentator O’Day continues, “Jesus’ prayer for the community models how the community is to understand and receive its identity in the world. It is to understand that its life rests in and depends on God’s care. In this prayer, Jesus does not supply pragmatic directives on how to arrive at church unity or how to recognize the face of the ‘evil one’ in the world. Rather, Jesus places the church’s future in the hands of God and invites the church to listen in on that conversation. The church’s future is thus shown to be God’s, not ours. That is, the future of the church ultimately does not depend on or derive from the church’s work, but rests with God.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> O’Day, Gail R., *The New Interpreter’s Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, pg. 797.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

When Jesus' followers, those with whom he is closest are in the midst of their greatest transition, Jesus prays for them. For those disciples in the text that Amity read who were standing there looking up wondering, 'what now?', it is for them Jesus prays.

There are many times when we wonder why something has happened or what will happen next and our calling in those times is often to wait. To stand. To wonder. To pray. And even, especially, in those times Jesus prays for us. And reminds us that our work, our life is in God's hands.

This is Ascension Sunday. A time of shifting plates and wondering what next. Not quite Pentecost. Yet right here, right now, in these moments we know that we are a community for whom Jesus prays.<sup>3</sup> What a difference that makes.

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<sup>3</sup> O'Day, Gail R., *The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, pg. 798.