

Reflection on the Word: Easter 7, May 29, 2022

Acts 16:9-15; John 17:20-26

At the beginning of today's gospel we heard Jesus' words: "I am not praying just for these followers. I am also praying for everyone else who will have faith because of what my followers will say about me."

Or as in another translation: "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."

These words are among my favorites from the gospel of John. I know there are lots of others that might be chosen as favorites by some of you:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ..."

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live ..."

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places ..."

But I love that verse from today's gospel, because in it we hear Jesus praying for us. Yes. Jesus...nearly two thousand years ago...is praying...for us!

Let's set the scene. Again, as in last week's gospel, it is Thursday evening, the night on which Jesus will be

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betrayed, handed over to his enemies, deserted by his friends, tried, convicted, and ultimately crucified. And knowing all that is to come, he gathers his closest friends, offers them parting words of encouragement and hope, and then prays for them. He prays that they may endure the challenges that

that they will be drawn together as one as Jesus and the heavenly Father are one. And then he prays not only for them, but for all for who will believe in Jesus because of their testimony.

Think about that for a moment. We are now persons of faith, we are now part of a church community, because someone told us about Jesus. Whether it was a parent, friend, grandparent, minister, Sunday School teacher, or whomever, someone told us the good news about Jesus, and about God's love for us all; and inspired by this news, welcomed into the church community, empowered by the Spirit, we came to believe.

But here's the thing: someone told the person who told us. And someone else told that person. And someone told that person as well...and so on and so on, all the way back to the testimony of these disciples who,

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despite their fear and confusion – both before and after Easter – nevertheless were moved to go out and share the good news of Jesus with others.

So when Jesus prays not only for his disciples but for those who believe because of them, he's praying for all Christians, all the way up to you and me and the people to whom we will share the good news of God's love and grace, through our living, our witness, our ministry of compassionate caring and sharing.

In the reading from Acts, we meet Lydia, a woman who dealt in an industry that boiled Mollusks to dye the cloth reserved for the rich and famous ... a dealer in purple cloth. She, and a group of women with her, being eager to receive the faith that declared "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus" would gather regularly near the river in what became one of the earliest Christian churches. Lydia eagerly received the message of the apostle Paul, and was baptized, along with members of her household. Her example of faithfulness and her hospitality, two of the greatest Christian virtues, became the basis for her ministry within the community. And we might ask ourselves

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how our faith moves us to "listen eagerly" and welcome graciously, as Lydia did?

There's a story about a group of women who had gathered together for their monthly "Ladies Fellowship Meeting" in the church parlour. The average age was somewhere in the mid to late seventies ... Many of them were widowed and they had been involved in the church for most of their lives. They enjoyed one another's company and valued the sense of community and support that their group provided. In their meetings they would often talk about the 'good old days' ... but they weren't stuck in the past or living only with their eyes on the rear-view mirror.

One day, after lunching on dainty egg salad, cheese and cherry, and rolled asparagus sandwiches, they decided to move to the sanctuary for a brief moment of worship before their meeting. They were startled to find a homeless man curled up on one of the back pews, sound asleep.

"O my, what should we do about him?" one of them asked. "Well, I don't think we should call the police – We're in a cold snap and he probably didn't have any

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place to sleep last night...” And in unity of spirit, two of them went off to search for a blanket from the nursery, while the others prepared a plate of their dainty sandwiches and a few cookies, setting it near him, because no doubt he’d be hungry when he woke up. One of the younger women, who had a thermal mug in her car, went and retrieved it and filled it with hot tea and set it next to the sandwiches and cookies. Then they quietly made their way to the front pews, read a scripture, and said a prayer, including a prayer for the well-being of the man on the back pew and for all God’s children who, like him, were living on the streets. Following which they moved into an adjoining room for their meeting.

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word (or we might say their action), that they may all be one. 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.

We are called to be stewards of this sometimes costly and tough work of God’s people, stewards of the mystery of God’s abundance and acceptance and hope. In a world that seeks to pit us against one another

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along any number of lines—from right to left, rich to poor, privileged to disenfranchised, black or white, old or young—Jesus gives us a new story to live, to tell, and to share. Instead of seeing the “other” as different or less than or terrifying, Jesus prays that God’s love and presence will be in us, and that this presence will help us to weave a common thread as beloved children of the Creator.

And O how this world needs us to turn our hearts toward one another and live in God’s mighty and freely given love. But it doesn’t just depend on us. Though the path to unity may not be easy, we must never forget that we are still on the receiving end of Jesus’ prayer; and that the kind of unity of heart and spirit which Jesus speaks of, does not rely solely on us, but on what God is able to do through us and sometimes in spite of us.

Melissa Bane Sevier, reflecting on the gospel, expressed thoughts that go something like this: When the heart of God beats within us, our own hearts want to join with the hearts of others, that we may be one. We forget this to our spiritual peril when we fail to empathize with people of another race,

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language, or religion; with those who are of a different income status or gender identity.

If we view news footage of refugees fleeing war and danger and we don't feel anything, we have silenced the heart of God that makes us one.

If we hear stories of people who are grieving or struggling from the actions of others, such as in that tragic school shooting in Texas, or through Indian Residential School experience, and we don't sense a connection to their pain, then we have some reconnecting to do with God's heart.

It is the heartbeat of God that makes our hearts beat together, that brings us into unity, despite our differences, to care for both neighbour and stranger. As our hearts learn to beat in union, humanity grows closer to the solidarity and peace every heart desires.

In a world where the tendency, too often, is to tear people apart, may we recommit to being reflections of God's person, God's love, in the way we live together. In our own family circles, in the church or community of faith, with co-workers, in organizations such as the Order of the Eastern Star, may we be those who

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through shared values and charitable or benevolent work, help others to believe in the love of God at work in their lives. And as the men's choir sang, so let our hearts, with unity of purpose and mission, also sing: "And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love!" Amen.