

Sermon Easter 7 Year A
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
May 24, 2020
The Rev. Catherine L Tatem

Acts 1:6-14

Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

And 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."

Jesus is praying to God, not in some far off place, the wilderness or a garden, but in front of his friends with whom he has shared a meal and an act of servitude. Jesus has sent one out to "do quickly" what you are going to do (betray Jesus to the authorities), and he knows that another of his friends will deny him. Jesus prays to God, appeals to God for God's protection for this fearful group of followers, right in their presence. It is as if we are listening in, if not sitting right at that table.

[God,] I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me.

In other words, protect my friends and betrayers and those who deny me ... protect my friends and my enemies in your name and in the name of Jesus.

How might your faith be informed by knowing that Jesus prays for you, for us, and in such a way that we have heard everything that he says? What difference does it make to overhear Jesus praying for you? Think about it ...

You've had a great day – Jesus is praying for you.

You stubbed your toe – Jesus is praying for you.

You got a new job, planted a garden, lost a friend, laughed until your stomach hurt, lived in a time of pandemic – Jesus is praying for you.

The phrase "prayer changes things" can sound ... trivial ... if we think of prayer as "God I need this now." Or "God how dare you do this to me" or "why" or, with the psalmist,

"How long, Lord, how long?"

The Israelites were in the desert for 40 years; Noah and his family were in the ark – "a long time," and the human characterization of time does not mean that God wears a watch and shows up at an agreed-upon time.

No, God is always present, showed up in Jesus, is present through the Holy Spirit, and is praying for YOU today. We are not alone in our lament and our despair. What if this time is our Exodus time – our lengthened (but less than 40 years) time, our fast from the Eucharist, maybe our jobs or our paychecks and certainly in-person ... everything. We, too, would complain to Moses that he had brought us to this place to die. Except Moses did not do that (take the Israelites to the desert to die), and God is not doing that now.

No. Jesus is praying for you. The Holy Spirit is advocating for us. When we pray, we are joining the whole company of heaven in addressing God. And right in front of us, with us, where we can hear, Jesus is praying for us, to God.

“Protect them, God.”

“So that they may be one, as we are one.” This portion of the prayer is our challenge. We are one worshiping community, one family of God, and we, probably like the apostles, have no idea what to do next. Jesus has ascended; we are bereft and confused. You and I did not have five chapters in the gospel of John telling us that we would be asked to stay home for an indeterminate time; maybe we did not know to say goodbye to some of those normal days and ways of life. I did not know that store shelves would be empty for so long, and that things like toilet paper, flour, and “usual” things would be gone or rationed.

Beloved. Join in this prayer with Jesus. We are in the same room, awaiting an uncertain future – and Jesus is here. What is Jesus’ prayer posture; what is yours? What action outside of yourself might you regret that you did not do today? You can do it today because Jesus is praying for your protection. Be vulnerable in loving others in a world that values power and control. Resist with love. Say the simple things: thank you, you made a difference; and the tougher ones: I love you; I’m sorry; I forgive you.

When we spend time in prayer, concurrent with Jesus praying for us, we are getting to know our Lord and our God. And this, Jesus tells us, is eternal life, and we have it right now.

From the gospel of John:

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (John 17.3).” Eternal life is to know God and Jesus. We are here, and not alone. Please, dear God, help us know you more and more. *Amen.*