

The Rev. Nina Bacas
Year C Easter 7 May 29, 2022
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria Virginia
Gospel of John 17:20-26

When I was in my 20's, my grandmother gave me a red-letter Bible. Do you know what I mean by that? It's a Bible where every word spoken by Jesus is in red ink. Our Gospel today is pure red. It is all the words of Jesus and has been so for most of 4 chapters. But today instead of Jesus talking to us, he is talking to God and praying for us. It's called a priestly prayer because he is interceding for us before God, just as priests do.

On the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost, we always hear a portion of John 17. This year, it is the end of the chapter. Jesus's farewell words just minutes before his arrest are retold on the Sunday between the Ascension and the Day of Pentecost. It is because these 9 days, this novena, is a time to pray for the unity and mission of the church. Today we overhear the intimate words of the Son to the Father as he prays for the disciples and also for those in the future who will believe in him. In his final moments before the Passion, Jesus's concern was for those he loves. He prays for us.

He prays for us because Jesus knows the world would be hard on his believers. What was true then, is true now. It feels overwhelming to be living amidst dangers, disagreements, hurts, and barriers, whether fresh or long-standing. Even if we are not living under threat, just hearing the news can be so upsetting that we have to limit our media exposure. While Jesus prays for us, he is also praying for the mission of the church. As Christians, we are one in the same.

Jesus knew that the only way that the message of God's love and redemption could continue to spread and heal this broken world, is by the believers sticking together. Our unity brings continuity, but even in community we can't do it alone. Jesus knew there is only one way we can face the pressures of the world that want to pull us apart. We will have to have access to a tremendous power. He knew we will have to share in the love that he shares with the Father. A love that is mutual, close and filled with trust. A love that is divine and eternal. This is the love, the power, that can tear down barriers and join people together.

So Jesus prays that we have with God nothing less than what he and the Father share. It's like Jesus is asking God to take the circle that is drawn around their love and draw it out again to include us. So that we may know their same divine love that is mutual, trusting and eternal. It's the love that walked with Jesus to the cross. It's the love that continues to carry the message of the cross amidst a world that many times appears to be in conflict with it.

Paul wrote in the letter to the Colossians, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." This love shared between the Father and the Son created the foundation of the world. This love is truth of the cosmos, the heart of reality. And Jesus asks the Father to draw us into it, because we need will need it. The love we find in the Father and the Son is the superglue that keeps us and Jesus's mission together.

Do you remember when superglue first came out? The label is not kidding. Don't get it on your skin because you really can glue your fingers together. But here's how God's superglue love works. As people drawn into the circle of love shared by the Father and the Son, they are bonded in community because this same love between the Father and the Son is the love we share with one another. The unity Jesus is praying for isn't political or religious. He isn't asking that we all think the same. He is praying for unity of personal relationships. He wants us to love the same, just as the Father loves him. It's a unity where trust, mutuality and closeness rise from reconciliation, forgiveness and radical welcome.

Being in this divine love of the Father and the Son provokes a response. That response is our mission. Jesus responded to the Father by his mission to the cross. Our response is to love one another as God loves us and to draw the circle wider to enable others to share in this same love. To know God's love through us and how we live.

Jesus prays that we may all be one because only through our unity will others know of God's love. If we can stand strong against all the worldly pressures that pull all peoples apart, then the world will see us as different. The world will take notice that God's love is real. That God's love changes the world. People will see that the Father sent the Son to this out of love for us. Jesus prayed for this as the only way forward.

If the love of the Father and the Son is in us, then the presence of Jesus is in us too. This is why we hear this Maundy Thursday passage again on the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost. At this time, Jesus went up and out, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, his presence came into all of us. This is what Jesus prayed for us on that Thursday night, and the Father answered his prayers.

Every generation has its fears and dangers. So every generation in the church is called to remember that we are participating in a reality much greater than our despair. The world may continue to sadden us, but we know love will prevail because Jesus is present. His mission was and is a response to the love shared between him and the Father. We respond to that same love with our own mission. We answer Jesus's prayer by living with our eyes open to what is real. We answer his prayer by continuing to stay together in relationship, by reflecting his presence, and drawing in others to this same love of the Father and the Son. This love is the ultimate truth that gives us hope for the world and life eternal. This love is the substance of heaven. When we draw another into the circle of God, we bring another little slice of heaven on to earth. For this Jesus prays.