

Sermon May 24, 2020
Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
The Rev. Dcn. Patricia Marks
Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

I want you to pretend that you are sitting at a table with a group of friends—and you’re not wearing masks! These are the folks you love, the ones you’ve worked with, played with, traveled with. You’ve wept with them and rejoiced with them. Now you gather together to talk and eat with the one who has led you down a path you never ever could have imagined.

And he is sitting there, looking rather thoughtful. When he starts speaking, you all stop, and listen.

But perhaps not everyone really *hears*. Because later, one of the listeners—Judas—will get up and leave, leave to pursue phantom fortune, to betray his friend, his mentor, his Savior. And Jesus, who *knows* that after this dinner he will be arrested and crucified, is not hiding on the top of a mountain grieving and meditating. No, he is *here* with his friends, eating good bread and drinking good wine. He is *here*. Remember that word.

Remember it, because if you take a careful look at this passage from John, you discover that it’s not about doctrine or creeds: it is about relationship. It’s about what you are experiencing at that table—connection. Relationship. Love.

The experience at that table reminds me of something that happened many years ago, when a dear family friend was in the hospital in Philadelphia. We were here in Valdosta, and Lillia was not expected to last the night. So we called her. But there was only one thing we could say through our tears, and it was this: I love you.

That is what Jesus is saying as he sits at dinner with his dearest friends and associates. He has spent his days walking with them, teaching them how to act in His Father’s image. He knows what will happen after this last supper of theirs together, the last time they will sit in peace and relative safety, until the end begins.

So, in what scholars call the High Priestly prayer, he prays to God on their behalf. What else can he do? He has spoken in parables; he has spoken plainly; in fact, his actions speak louder than words. The very stones have cried out! Yet this group sitting wide-eyed around him, the crumbs of bread and half-full glasses of wine forgotten, this group still needs more. These are the ones—we are the ones!-- in whose hands Jesus is leaving the rest of his sheep.

And now, as he says, “the ‘hour has come.’” Has anyone ever been so alone as he? Has anyone ever been in such communion with God? That hour is the still point at which everything—*everything*—is redefined. The hour has come for the disciples, too, the point at which everything in their lives will change.

And friends, what is terrifying and glorious, is that the hour has come for us, too—not tomorrow, but today: here and now. “I will give eternal life to all those God has put in my care,” says Jesus. “Here’s what I mean,” he continues—“this is eternal life, that they may know you,

the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I have made your name known to them.” He’s saying, in short, that he has made God known to the disciples.

Can you think of a single person who *knows* God and who doesn’t work to establish His kingdom *in* the world? Look at our bishops, look at our priests. Look at history! John Wesley traveled over 8000 miles a year; Jackson Kemper braved the Wild West; St. Columba built a monastery on Iona. Untold numbers of deaconesses traveled to foreign lands to establish hospitals and schools; our friend Lillia visited and fed anyone in her neighborhood who was ill. Mother Theresa rolled up her sleeves in Calcutta; and Martin Luther King kept on preaching until the day he died.

And Jesus worked—oh, how he worked. He walked countless miles, through dangerous territory; he answered endless questions, endured endless insults. Above all, he healed the sick and suffering. All this knowing the end he was destined for.

“This is eternal life, that they may know you,” Jesus prays. This is eternal life, that *we* may know God through Christ. Eternal life is not just a promise, a goal, something that will happen in the future. It is grounded in history, in our actions. So how should we act? What does “knowing God” mean? It’s summed up in a simple rule—love your neighbor as yourself. But it is also a complex rule, because it defies innumerable marketplace and cultural ethics.

Jesus’s prayer for his disciples—and that means us!—is about *knowing*. In fact, he says that he has made God’s name known to us. And that’s a serious matter. You remember, when Moses asked God his name, he was simply told, “I am who I am.”

It is a serious matter because to know someone’s name is to have power over them: Adam named the animals, your parents named you, you name your children. And if your mother calls you by your full name, you’d better come running!

So if we are disciples, God knows our real names and has called *us* by our real names. And he has welcomed us to know him as well. The great “I am,” the ground of being itself, is revealed to us by Christ time and time again. “I am the light of the world,” he says; “I am the bread of life”; “I am the good Shepherd.” I am action, I am enlightenment, I am love. I *am* the Word of God; you will know him through me.

To know this is to live out the New Testament promise of eternal life. So Jesus, in this High Priestly Prayer, prays for his people: “Holy Father, protect them . . . that they may be one, as we are one.”

Protect us, Jesus prays, as if we were actually worth something; as if we were inestimable treasures—pure crystal, unalloyed gold. Protect us by making us one, by unifying us, by bringing us into communion in the same way that Christ and God are. Wow.

If we are one, we are to work to break down barriers, disagreements, dislikes; we are to reconcile and to be reconciled. If we are one, we are to change the way of the world, because we know that eternal life is *Now*. Amen. +