



Easter 7 / A
24 May 2020
Split Screen Moment

Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

“... 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.”

This excerpt from John’s Gospel comes from what, for centuries, has carried the title of “Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer”. Read as part of each year’s Maundy Thursday celebration, this lengthy discourse comprises the entirety of John’s seventeenth chapter, and is placed on Jesus’ lips during the Last Supper with his disciples in the hours just before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Only a few hours after these words are spoken, Jesus will be dead; so, these are, in many ways, his final thoughts, his final words, his deathbed confession. And his last prayer, final request is for us, his followers:

“... 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.”

In most musicals – and in many movies – there comes a moment when two or more main characters, are separated, but both still remain on the stage or screen; together, but apart – something we have all come to know and practice over the past several weeks. In a musical, they will often sing a song together, their voices weaving in and out, around and through, entwining with and playing off of one another. In a movie, the screen is likely split between them, showing what each is doing, often musing on the other's actions, thoughts and emotions. Separate and apart physically, yet together and united, emotionally and spiritually. We now know all about that.

In these scenes, the characters are alone, but linked, united, but separate, in what John Mayer termed in his song of the same title, “Split Screen Sadness”.

2020 has given all of us our very own moments of “split screen sadness”. COVID-19 has forced us all to maintain physical distance, work or attend school from home, disrupt our routines, cancel our appointments, keep us apart, away from our churches, away from celebrating the Eucharist, quarantined in isolation that has come to feel more like house arrest. What, then, does Jesus' prayer for us all to be one mean for us today, here and now, in this moment, in this particular time? How can we “be one” with each other, when we have to settle for online worship services, curbside pickup, and business meetings, family and social gatherings by Zoom, rather than sharing in the hugs, the sacraments, face-to-face conversations, and in-person expressions of love and friendship to which we are so accustomed – and which we all so desperately long for and need?

The Church throughout history has also had its share of split screen sadness. Almost exactly a century ago, the 1918 flu pandemic forced churches to be closed, much like we have had to close in 2020. Many of us will remember how the HIV/AIDS scourge in the 1980s and 90s gave people a healthy fear of disease, and at the same time, an unhealthy fear of one another. And long before that, in nearly every century, plagues would periodically rip through the population, forcing separations, and leaving only despair, sickness, and death in their wake. In these turbulent times, it is helpful to remember that we are not the first to walk this road we walk now. We are not the first Church people to experience the “split screen sadness” caused by rampant disease.

In this morning's Gospel passage, Jesus enters into his own split screen sadness moment as he prepares to die. He has spent a long time – three years - talking to his disciples, attempting to prepare them for this very moment. Now, in what he knows to be his final hours, he shares one last Passover meal with them, lays aside his robe and washes their feet like a servant, on the night before he will willingly and obediently lay down his life for his friends. In his final words, this

final prayer, it seems he is preparing both himself and his disciples for his imminent death.

Many of us have experienced standing or sitting by a deathbed of a loved one. If so, we will understand what it is like to be with a person as they prepare to die. We know that, in these final moments, deep truths are often spoken. We may not know how to say goodbye, but we understand the importance – for them, and perhaps even more importantly, for us - to be present with a loved one as they take those final steps toward death. One of the real tragedies of this COVID moment is the thousands of split screen moments of people who have had to die alone, and the family members who have been denied these final, important, intimate moments.

Perhaps one thing this pandemic has done for us is to point out that we don't often know how to be separate, but still united. This morning, as we read this passage in light of the Ascension and Jesus' departure from earth to be reunited with his heavenly Father, we realize that this new normal of "apart, but united" is exactly what Jesus is preparing his followers for — how to remain united with him, and with each other, even when he is not physically present with them.

Later in this chapter of John, Jesus will say, *"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."*

Crisis moments and experiences will often teach us great truths. This is true of the disciples at the time of Jesus' death, and it is true of us here in 2020. In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself is the Word made flesh, the truth made manifest in our human flesh. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the disciples learn that the worst thing need not be the last thing, for in Christ, all things are made whole, and made new. In our own time, we are being given the opportunity to learn similar things. I am a firm believer and proponent that even in the most difficult and darkest of times, we can learn something of value to carry into our future.

In these final days of the Church's 50-day long Easter season, on this past Thursday the Church marked the Feast of the Ascension. The Book of Acts records that when Christ ascended, the disciples could only stand stock still, frozen in place, simply staring up into the sky. The angels sent to accompany Jesus into heaven, ask them, "Why do you stand here, looking up toward heaven?" But the disciples have no answer. In that moment, they don't know what to do.

The truth is: It is OK not to know what to do next. It is OK to be still. It is OK to simply put one foot in front of the other and muddle through. And it is OK to be

taken aback by physical separation from those we love, whose presence comforts us, and lifts us up.

In the present moment, we – like those first disciples - are learning how to be with one another, united in Christ, even when we are not physically present. During our time of “split screen sadness,” we have united around the Word, and our mutual love for Christ, and for one another. Mistakes will be made. We have done nothing perfectly – have, and continue, in some ways, to merely muddle our way through this crisis – and that’s OK, too – as long as we allow this time to teach us. For in this way, we will be sanctified by the truth and held together in love by Christ.

This crisis might also serve to teach us other things, such as how we are united in Christ with people we will never meet: Christians around the world continue to gather, and Christ’s prayer is that we be one with them. Christ is holding us together with people all around the world. Even though we cannot be physically present with Christians in other nations, we can be united with them in Christ, just as we have been united even in our own separations within our congregations.

We are also united with the saints throughout history: Christian heroes from all walks of life and across the ages are united with us, too, though our earthly limitations of time and space mean that we can never be physically present with them. Let our separation during this pandemic always remind us that physical separation is no obstacle to Christ, Our Risen and Ascended Lord, who holds us all together in an embrace of love.

Perhaps, then, this pandemic can teach us more than how to better wash our hands or maintain appropriate social distance. Perhaps it can do more than be a moment of split screen sadness for all of us. Perhaps it can truly teach us to be one in Christ both with people around us, as well as with those with whom we may never be physically present in this life. Perhaps it can serve as a reminder that regardless of our physicality or locality, we are all one in Christ, and Christ is with us, now and always. Perhaps we can learn and truly believe that in Christ, neither death, nor life, nor principalities, nor powers, nor wars - nor pandemics - can ever truly separate us. Thanks be to God.

Alleluia! Amen.