

The 7th Sunday of Easter: The Sunday after Ascension Day
May 28, 2017
The Rev. Deacon Judith A. Marinco

Acts 1:6-14
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36
Ephesians 1:15-23
John 17:1-11

In the name of the Father—who gives us light to see,
the Son—who gives us lives to serve,
and the Spirit—who gives us lips to speak. Amen.

**“ . . . the words you gave me I have given to them,
and they accepted them . . . I pray for them.”** John 17: 1-11a

For a minute, let's take a look at the timeframe of today's reading from John. The prayer that Jesus offers is the final scene of the farewell meal, or the Last Supper. Jesus stops speaking to his disciples and addresses God in prayer. This prayer highlights the unity of the Father, Son, and the believing community. Jesus prayed for his disciples, including those of us who follow him today. He prayed that God would keep his chosen believers safe from Satan's power, setting them apart and making them pure and holy, uniting them through his truth. Jesus was asking that the disciples be united in harmony and love as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united—the strongest of all unions.

Jesus great desire for his disciples was that they would become one. He wanted them unified as a powerful witness to the reality of God's love. Are we helping to unite the body of Christ, the church? We can do this by praying for other Christians, avoid gossip, build others up, work together in humility, give our time and money, praise Christ, and refuse to get sidetracked arguing over conflict-ridden matters.



It's 2:30 in the morning. A police officer sees a light in the window of a Milwaukee church hall. He knocks on the door and a parishioner answers.

“Everything OK?”

“Yes, officer we're just having our usual prayer vigil.”

That's not exactly true.

The small church wanted to provide a warm, safe place for homeless people to stay on Milwaukee's cold winter nights, but there was no way the parish could afford to meet city code. So they decided to hold an “all-night prayer vigil” to which all were welcome. The vigil is now

greatly appreciated by local police and neighbors as well as well the homeless who take advantage of the “warm” vigil.

The genius of the ministry is that the guests have taken on the major role in managing the program. Parish “prayer leaders” have witnessed the amazing transformation of seemingly helpless people into competent managers of their own situation. They turn away people who are intoxicated or otherwise unable to cooperate. They determine the timing of smoking breaks. They keep the church clean. They “have each other’s backs” as a community.

One volunteer believes, “I think this is what Jesus had in mind when he called together the most unlikely people to be his disciples and support community — in other words, church.”

Maybe “prayer vigil” isn’t such a stretch, after all.

The Ascension of the Lord is not the marking of a departure but the realization of a presence. Matthew’s Gospel begins with the dawning of Emmanuel: “God is with us”; it concludes with Emmanuel’s promise: “I am with you always, even to the end of time.” It is not an abstract or distant presence; Christ is the center of our Church in word, in sacrament, in every moment of generosity and every act of compassion we perform and experience.

Christ is in our midst in everything we do in his name: our Sunday Eucharist, a group of children learning the Lord’s Prayer, a gathering of knitters each week to make prayer shawls for the sick, a legally-sanctioned “prayer vigil” for the homeless on a frigid winter night. The charge Jesus leaves to his disciples on the mountain of the Ascension is left to all of us two millennia later: we are called to teach, to witness and to heal in our own small corners of the world, from our kitchen tables to our church hall.



In his landmark book **Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear**, Harvard psychologist Robert Coles chronicled the stories of children struggling to come of age in the desegregating South in the 1960s.

A heroine of Coles’ study was six-year-old Ruby Bridges and her family in New Orleans. Ruby was the first black child to attend the William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. Before her first day of school ended, parents emptied the school of white children in a massive boycott. Ruby learned alone that year, taught by the one teacher willing to remain. The little girl and her family were objects of hateful slurs and death threats.

Dr. Coles spent a great deal of time with Ruby and the Bridges. Ruby’s display of strength, stoicism, and bright cheer in the midst of her daily hell at school caught his attention and puzzled him. He began to meet with her every week.

One day Ruby’s teacher told Coles that she had noticed Ruby moving her lips as she was walking into school. So Coles asked her, “Who were you talking to, Ruby?”

“I was talking to God and praying for the people in the street,” she said.

“Why were you doing that, Ruby?”

“Well, because I wanted to pray for them. Don’t you think they need praying for?”

Coles agreed but pushed further. “Where did you learn that?”

“From my mommy and daddy and from the minister at church. I pray every morning [when I come to school] and every afternoon when I go home.”

“But Ruby, those people are so mean to you. You must have some other feelings besides just wanting to pray for them.”

“No,” she said, “I just keep praying for them and hope God will be good to them . . . I always pray the same thing. ‘Please, dear God, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.’”

Ruby’s prayer mirrors that of Jesus’ prayer in today’s Gospel. Her prayer is a beautiful witness to Jesus’ compassion and humility, the values of the Gospel her parents and church taught her to put into practice. And, like Jesus’ prayer, Ruby’s prayer is centered in others, seeking what is good for them despite the bad they have inflicted on her.

In today’s touching scene from the Last Supper, we see and hear Jesus commending every disciple of every time and place — and that includes you and me — to his Father. It is a connection that transcends our failings and sins, a connection that seeks only our good whether we deserve such blessedness or not.

May Ruby’s prayer and Jesus’ prayer become our prayer:
prayer that seeks only good for one another,
prayer that honors and celebrates the dignity we all share
as sons and daughters of God.

Amen.

Resources:

Connections for May 2017

“A child leads” by Peter W. Marty, **The Christian Century**, March 29, 2017.

Howard Bowman, writing **The Christian Century**, February 3, 2016.

The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha, Abingdon.

Life Application Study Bible: New International Version, Tyndale.