

16 May 2021

Easter 7

John 17:6-19

Did you hear the big, although a little off-key version of the “Hallelujah Chorus” on Thursday morning, when the CDC announced that vaccinated persons no longer had to wear masks indoors or outdoors? Well, I heard it in my head at least. *Hallelujah!* We need to digest exactly what this means for us at St. Thomas, so for the time being we’ll keep wearing our masks and maintaining prudent social distancing practices here, but nevertheless we can all feel the movement of change happening. The hard work, the sacrifices of lockdown and masking and distancing and now universally available vaccinations – are bearing fruit. We can see a new dawn breaking just over the horizon. Life is opening up again. *Hallelujah!*

And yet what this new dawn will bring isn’t exactly clear yet. One thing is for certain, as we’ve been saying for quite a while now, we’re not going back to February 2020. The old normal is gone. Over and done. What’s to come? Well, any crystal ball is a little cloudy. I really don’t know with any certainty and neither does anybody else.

Now, of course, I’m particularly interested in what this newly breaking dawn means for our little community at St. Thomas. You know, in the face of the unknown there are always a couple of possible responses. One is anxiety. That’s where lots of us go when we face the unknown. We worry. We get a little scared. We catastrophize. We begin to make what psychologists call “negative future predictions.” Or, on the other hand, we try to soothe our anxiety by making *positive* future predictions – “I just know it’ll all be OK, I just know it”, as our knuckles turn white. We’re hanging in. That’s one way to approach an unknown future. And please remember, the future is *always* unknown because it hasn’t happened yet! There’s another way to approach that unknown future, though, and that’s to be curious about it. To sit at the edge of the unknown with curiosity. With wonder, even. Not making any predictions, either negative or positive. Just sitting with curiosity and openness. I’ll admit that takes a lot of courage – sometimes more courage than I can muster. But it’s just the truth that living in the reality of a more or less, unknown future is healthier for us than living in the fantasy of a future we manufacture in our own heads.

So this brings me around to our Gospel reading this morning. We’re dropping in on the conclusion of Jesus’ farewell to his friend on the night before his trial and execution. We’ve been with him and with them over the last several Sundays as he’s told them goodbye and has said words to them about that unknown future which is the source of pretty considerable anxiety for them. So what does he do? He prays for them. He offers up his hope for the future of his friends to his Father in prayer. All throughout his long goodbye, Jesus has been making promises to his friends – and that includes us – about the future, and now – in prayer – he turns that future over to God.

He doesn’t say, “Here’s what I want you to do once I’m gone.” He doesn’t leave the future in *their* hands. He leaves their future in *God’s* hands. Their future – the Church’s future, St. Thomas’ future – is in God’s hands, not ours.

So as we sit at the edge of their unknown future, what if we asked ourselves a question about our identity? Who are we as St. Thomas Church? I'm sure you can come up with a dozen different answers. We're a community that gathers to 1) worship 2) fellowship 3) serve 4) create friendships, etc. But what if our answer is this: "We are a community that Jesus prays for"? Have you had the experience of someone praying for you? Have you had the experience of hearing your name spoken out loud in prayer? A few years ago, when I was undergoing treatment for cancer, I was overwhelmed by the prayers of so many of you of this St. Thomas community and of friends across the country – and people I didn't even know. Prayer is powerful, and when it's Jesus who's praying for us? Well. He's praying to his Father with such intimacy and he's bold enough to hold God to God's promises. "You have given. You have sent. You have loved. Now keep. Now sanctify. Let them be one," he says to God. Jesus opens up his relationship with the Father to include the Church, to include St. Thomas, to include you and me!

And there's nothing pie-in-the-sky or sentimental about this. Jesus prays this prayer as he moves towards his death. He's turned his own future over to God. Let me say that again. AS he faces certain death, he doesn't try to run away. He doesn't turn and fight. He could have. No, as he faces his own death, Jesus turns his future over to God. You see, he doesn't try to solve the most intractable problem we can imagine – our own deaths – on his own. No, he faces the future and trusts his future to God. In His prayer, he recognizes that *the future belongs to God!* Even in the face of death, the future belongs to God.

Imagine that you are one of the friends of Jesus who's listening in on his prayer. Your friend – your leader – is facing certain death – and you're anxious and worried and scared. What will the future look like? What will happen to me and to my little community? And then you hear your friend praying:

"All mine are yours and yours are mine and I have been glorified in them. 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."

In this moment of great change, as we find ourselves sitting at the edge of the unknown, can you hear Jesus praying for us? Can you hear him saying with such intimacy to his Father, protect them in my name? Let them be one as you and I are one? Can you hear that? I can. And I can say this with complete confidence – our future, the future of this beloved and blessed community is in God's hands. We who come together here – we who gather in Jesus' name – we are one just as Jesus and his Father are one. And as *one*, we are vital and strong. As *one* we can look towards whatever the future holds with the confidence that Jesus is praying for us still and that we are in God's hands.

So maybe that *Hallelujah Chorus* that you heard so faintly on Thursday was about more than taking your masks off. Maybe that *Hallelujah Chorus* was your way of thanking Jesus as he prays for you. As he prays for all of us. Yes, the masks are coming off. Yes, we will soon be coming back together and not six feet apart. Yes, a new day is breaking. And we are one as Jesus and his Father – our Father – are one. *Hallelujah!*