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St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year A)
May 28, 2017

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

"Three Gifts from God"

The passages we call the "final discourses" in the Gospel of John, Chapters 14-16, and especially the prayer by Jesus, found in our Gospel text today out of John 17, contain some of the densest, most theological language in the New Testament. Today's Gospel takes us back to Thursday evening in Holy Week—that moment in the life of Jesus when he was in that upper room in Jerusalem, at the Last Supper with the disciples, offering up his take on what the disciples would face after his death and resurrection. Jesus prays this to God on behalf of his disciples:

"I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them."

As I read these lines slowly this week, I was reminded of that song by John Lennon and Paul McCartney from the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* album, circa 1967, I think: "I am he as you are he as you are me, and we are all together...I am the Walrus!"¹ Jesus' language is deeply abstract at times, and as I hacked my way through the thick, verbal underbrush of his rhetoric this past week, I was tempted to slow my reading-tempo down to 16-speed to grasp his meaning. (All of you from the era of vinyl-records, I believe, get my drift!)

So, what's going on here? What is Jesus talking about as he prays to God?

Well, if we back up in today's reading, we see that Jesus begins his prayer to God, on behalf of his disciples, using language that's saturated with the *theme of giving*, of all things.² In fact, the word "give," and its variants, shows up eleven times in our Gospel text this morning. And it's in this language of giving, I believe, that we begin to understand Jesus' primary message to his disciples in that upper room.

Now if you look carefully, you can see that, at the center of his prayer, Jesus proclaims: "I have made your name known to those whom you *gave* me from the world." God has *given* disciples to Jesus as a gift, and by this gift of God's grace the disciples have come to realize that they *belong* to Jesus and that they have been joined—connected in belonging—to God, to the source of *all* life itself *through* Jesus. As Jesus says in his prayer to God, "They were yours, and you *gave* them to me." The gift is the knowledge that the disciples now have that they belong to a life *in* Jesus *given* to them freely by the *grace of God* with no strings attached. So, *knowledge of their belonging to Jesus* is the disciples' first gift from God.³

¹ John Lennon and Paul McCartney, "I am the Walrus," in *Beatles Lyrics*, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/i-am-the-walrus-lyrics-beatles.html> (accessed 5/11/2015).

² James Boyce, "Commentary on John 17:6-19," from *Preaching This Week*, in WorkingPreacher.org, 2012, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1292 (accessed 5/23/2017).

³ Boyce.

The second gift that the disciples receive from God is the *knowledge of God's name*. Again, Jesus said, "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world." As one commentator puts it, to know the name of God is to know "the character of the One who is the source of eternal life, which all the disciples have come to know in Jesus."⁴ The name of God stands for *all* that God has done through the life of Jesus and, most importantly, through his death and resurrection.⁵ This translates into a deep and intimate knowledge of the Source of all being, of God himself, given freely to the disciples by way of their witness of the words and real actions of Jesus in the world.

And the last gift that the disciples receive from God is the *knowledge of his Word* spoken through Jesus himself. Jesus gave the Word to the disciples; he spoke God's truth while he was here on earth. As John begins his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." (John 1:1-2) The disciples heard this Word, this truth of God spoken by Jesus, and by receiving it from Jesus—taking it into themselves—they came to believe, as absolute truth, that Jesus himself was sent from God out of love—an unconditional love—for them. And out of this belief, their spiritual connection with the God was established for all time.⁶

So...belonging to God, knowing God's name, and understanding God's truth, as understood through the real, lived life of Jesus: These are God's gifts to every one of Jesus' disciples, and as divine gifts they have the power to transform lives. *But here's at least part the good news of today's Gospel: These gifts also transformed Jesus*—yes, they transformed Jesus from a simple prophet to one glorified and made holy for all time. As Jesus says, speaking directly to God himself in prayer, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and *I have been glorified in them.*"

"I have been glorified *in them*," he says. Yes, you heard it right: Jesus claims that he was glorified—set apart, made holy—by the transformative action of God in the lives of the very disciples who received God's three-fold gifts of belonging and knowledge of God's name and Word. *The holiness of Jesus—his glorification—is linked directly to the transformation of everyone around him through the power of God's grace.* And here's the amazing thing: As Christ was glorified in this transformative moment of gift-giving by the very grace of God, so are we who faithfully receive God's three-fold gifts.

In faith, we are transformed into the image of God to create and do good in the world.

In faith, we are sanctified, made holy, and set apart from the world for the distinct purpose of changing it—for God's sake and his Kingdom. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone [and that includes us! everyone] who believes in him may not perish but may have everlasting life" (John 3:16). And this belief comes through the three-fold gifts given to us—yes, us, right here and now—by God...in Jesus.

And you know, the other extraordinary piece of good news in our Gospel reading today is that the Kingdom of God is much closer than we think. This good news tells us that the real, transformative power of God rests in the lives of those who come to believe that God is actively at

⁴ Boyce.

⁵ Boyce.

⁶ Boyce.

work in the world. Transformation happens here and not in some place beyond all knowing. This good news tells us that the Kingdom of God is close at hand and not far away. It tells us that the Kingdom actually unfolds as the three-fold gifts of God do their work in us in our daily lives.

So in the end, our sanctification—what makes us whole, what places us in right relationship with God—depends on our active *practice* of belief in the world. Our sanctification is not something that places us outside what really matters, but rather plunges us into the world by deepening our sense of responsibility to undertake *mission* on behalf of Jesus—to "[g]o into the world and proclaim the good news to...[all God's] creation,"⁷ as the Gospel of Mark urges us.

It comes from our responsibility to let the light of Christ be seen in us, to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."⁸

And it comes directly from Jesus, who prayed to God for the disciples, yes, *but also for us*.

Yes, Jesus is praying for each and every one of us even as we speak. Consider this: If you read ahead just nine verses beyond the end of our Gospel text today—Chapter 17, verse 20-21—you'll see the following petition that Jesus raises up to God on *our* behalf. He prays to God, "I ask not only on behalf of these [the disciples], but also on behalf of **those who will believe in me** through their word, that they all may be one" (John 17:20-21a).

"Those who *will* believe" in Jesus: ***That's us*** of course—the people in the future that Jesus envisioned, beyond the confines of time and space in that upper room in Jerusalem.⁹

In that upper room way back when, before any of us came into the world, Jesus was praying for us, and I believe he's still praying for us now. He prayed for the disciples, yes, but that prayer has been passed down in scripture, through time, to all of us. So in this sense it's a new prayer—the "Other Lord's Prayer," as one commentator puts it¹⁰—for each and every one of us. [PAUSE]

At the conclusion of my sermon this morning, there will be a brief period of silence, and during that silence I ask that you to consider this question: What one word captures what you would like Jesus to pray for you this week? Write that word down on a slip of paper, and from time to time this week pull it out and remind yourself that Jesus knows you and is praying for you even now.¹¹

Jesus' prayer for you is a gift, you know...part of his three-fold gift of belonging to God, knowing his name, and understanding his truth.

And in Jesus' prayer for you, I hope that you will come to know the real grace of God in your life. And that is my prayer for you.

Thanks be to God.

⁷ Mark 16:15

⁸ Matthew 5:16

⁹ David Lose, "The Other Lord's Prayer," in *Working Preacher*, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1492> (accessed 5/22/2017).

¹⁰ Lose.

¹¹ Lose.