

Good morning. Have you ever experienced a loss? Have you ever had someone in your life – someone who was important to you – go away?

What was that like for you?

Loss often brings up a grief response, doesn't it? And we respond to grief in understandable ways: anger, irritation, sensitivity to things, distancing – a pulling away, a deep sadness, and sometimes, even separation.

That's pretty normal. All of these reactions are pretty human of us. And when we have loved or appreciated much, the loss we feel can be quite deep and even overwhelming.

That's the situation that Jesus and the disciples are in, Today is what we call the Sunday after the Ascension, and the context of the Gospel is the post-resurrection Jesus preparing the disciples for his departure from them.

After all the disciples have been through, learning and growing over a three year period with Jesus, only to see him betrayed, arrested, tried, and crucified, and then resurrected on the third day. The disciples will probably never get over the shock and trauma of that event. --- and now - Jesus, is going away.

This famous passage in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel is often called Jesus' "high priestly prayer." In it, he sums up his recent teachings to the disciples, recounted in the previous three chapters. And having spoken to his followers, Jesus now turns to talk with God in prayer.

Jesus is fully aware of what his followers will soon go through after his departure. Though he will leave his Holy Spirit, his living, animating presence with them, imparted as a gift on the Day of Pentecost, he knows full well what stresses they will be under when he ascends.

Jesus knows that, in their grief, ordinary things, things which would be causes for mild disagreements in any other situation, now threaten to take on a new energy, passion, and sometimes even a desperate quality.

That small band of disciples, in modern language, is an emotional system, and an emotional system experiencing grief will be filled with uncertainty and anxiety.

And in a climate of anxiety and uncertainty, mistrust can creep in amidst our many worries, and the bonds of affection which hold the community together can be strained.

So Jesus prays for God's protection for his community of followers. He prays, specifically, for **Unity**. He prays that they "might all be one," as he and God are one. Jesus knows that disagreements will come and go, but the bond established in God will be the source of the disciple's strength and unity.

**Secondly**, in verse thirteen, Jesus prays "I speak these things in the world so that they may have my **Joy** made complete in themselves." We are made for Joy, Joy in God and Joy in our relationships with one another.

Joy is different than mere "happiness." Joy is deeper and more connected to finding meaning and purpose in things. Happiness is sometimes an outer expression of Joy, but Joy can sing even amidst tears. Happiness is often a fleeting thing. Joy endures, even in times of emotional drought, because it has a deep taproot, rooted in things that truly matter.

**And the third thing** Jesus prays for, along with unity and joy, is that his band of followers be "sanctified in the truth, as they remain **faithful in the struggle** to be the church *in the world*." In the context of verse 17, Jesus asked not that his disciples be taken out of the world, and its constant struggle, but rather that God's truth be *in them* and *with them* in the midst of it all.

The word for "sanctify" in verse 17 is the same as the word for "hallow" ("Hallowed be thy name") in the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:9, Luke 11:2). In both instances, the basic meaning is something set apart from common use, for a particular purpose of doing the work of the Spirit in the world.

Our very purpose as the Body of Christ is not to be taken out of the world, but to be “set apart” within the world. We are called and *sent*, for the sake of the world, be God’s heart and hands wherever and whenever we can. It is often said, “*Christ has no heart and hands but ours.*”

The late Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once famously said, “*the church is the only society on earth, that exists for the benefit of non-members.*”<sup>i</sup>

Jesus’s prayer was that this outward focus on our mission in the world would be accompanied by God’s blessing and protection.

And this very *struggle* to do the work of God in the world, this struggle that discomforts us, annoys us, inconveniences us and puts obstacles in our path, can be a good thing. It involves a certain necessary self-sacrifice, and can be the very process which helps us strengthen and grow in our discipleship of following Jesus.

I’m speaking here of the struggle sometimes to love your neighbor as yourself. The struggle to remain present to those in pain or emotional turmoil. The struggle to remain hopeful when the daily news feed is so absolutely terrible and disheartening.

A well-known story involves a young boy who captured a caterpillar and kept it in a jar. Each day he fed it fresh leaves until it grew, matured, and spun a cocoon, or chrysalis on the underside of the jar. In time, the walls of the chrysalis grew thinner, revealing that the caterpillar was mysteriously transforming into a butterfly inside. One day, peering through the now transparent walls, the boy saw the butterfly struggling, beating its developing wings against the cocoon. Hoping to help the creature emerge, he carefully snipped the edges of the cocoon that the butterfly might emerge more easily.

Sadly, the butterfly did not survive, and never unfolded its wings. Only much later, the boy came to learn that it is the very act of struggle that enables vital fluids to push out from the butterfly’s body into its wings, allowing them to develop fully.

Without the struggle, and the seemingly senseless beating of wings against the walls of the Chrysalis, the butterfly cannot become what it is meant to be.

For us as Christian community, for those us who choose each day to follow in the Way of Jesus, it is the very process of being present with one another and faithful to our calling in the midst of grief, anxiety, loss, and struggle, that enables us to be what we are called to be.

Have we ever experienced a loss? Have we ever had someone in your life – someone who is important to us – go away?

Yes, of course we have. In our varied individual lives, and in our life a faith community.

But Jesus does not leave us orphans. His prayer is one of unity, joy, and faithfulness in the struggle. And we are not left alone. Help is on the way, in the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is already here, within us, amongst us, and around us.

That's next week, on the Feast of Pentecost.

I'll be away, travelling, but the church will be there, by which, of course, I mean all of you, together.

Be well, friends. And in celebration of the Feast of Pentecost next Sunday, with its flames of the Holy Spirit descending, wear red.

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<sup>i</sup> Actually, we have no record of this quotation in any of his writings, but there is a long history that attests to this being a quip of his. It certainly is within the range of Temple's thinking about "church."