

May 29, 2022
John 17:20-26

Easter 7
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“It’s Not About You!”

“... that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

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In my first year of ordained ministry, I attended several ordination services for my seminary classmates. Since our seminary was sponsored by seven synods in the northeastern states, these services were led by a variety of bishops, each with their own worship leadership style and emphases during the ordinations. At one of these services, the bishop was also the preacher, and what he said has stuck with me ever since. He picked up one of the stoles that he would place around the neck of the newly ordained pastor and began to speak about its meaning. “This is a symbol of the office into which you are about to be ordained,” he said, “but there is something else that I want you to remember every time you put it around your neck: *it’s not about you!*” No one needs to hear your opinion when you preach; you are ordained to serve the Lord and to preach the Word of God. Never forget that!”

I think about those words every time I place a stole around my neck as I prepare to lead worship. While there is no requirement for Lutheran pastors to wear any specific clerical garb, pastors traditionally wear albs and stoles for specific reasons: the alb is a symbol of the baptism that calls all of us to serve God, and the stole is the symbol of the specific office of ministry into which I have been called. But the words of that bishop also serve as a reminder as I prepare to preach and lead worship that I have been entrusted with a great responsibility to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the congregation that has called me, and that I must always endeavour to proclaim God’s Word and not use this time and position to share my own opinions or seek advantage for myself. The stole I wear when I lead worship reminds me that *it’s not about you* – it’s about the Word of God.

As we come to the end of the Easter season, the word of our Lord Jesus Christ reminds us that the mission of the church that bears his name is never about itself, but about proclaiming the good news of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour. Today’s Gospel lesson is a portion of the High Priestly Prayer in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus’ prayer for his followers in the moments before his passion and death.

He begins his prayer by praying that God will “*glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed*” (John 17:5), “glory” being the word used by John to identify Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus then turns his attention to his disciples, praying “*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.*” (17:9). This is an *intercessory prayer*, like our prayers in Sunday worship where we pray for “*the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.*” Jesus is not praying for himself but praying for those he has called and who will now be commissioned as apostles, sent out to be witnesses to Christ “*in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). Jesus prays that God will “*sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth*” and that “*as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they may also be sanctified in truth.*” (17:17-19).

In the final portion of the prayer, Jesus expands the circle for whom he prays to include those who will come to believe through the work of his disciples: “*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word*” (17:20). Jesus turns his attention to the world and expresses his desire that the world will come to share in the knowledge of God that marks the life of the faith community. While in other parts of John’s Gospel the “world” (*kosmos*) is seen as actively hating the faith community (“*If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.*” – 15:18), here it is those outside of the faith community who are open to receiving the disciples’ witness. Jesus prays that those who come to believe in him will share in the same communal identity as those who brought them to faith, “*that they may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I in you, may they also be in us*” (17:21). The “unity” (*kathos*) for which Jesus prays is not intrinsic to the community itself but derives from the primal unity of the Father and Son. For the community to be “one” means that they mirror the mutuality and reciprocity of the Father/Son relationship (“*Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does the works.*” – 14:10). There is no “one” in the faith community without the “we” of the Father and Son.

Jesus’ prayer for the unity of the community of his disciples is not for their own sake; the purpose of the community’s oneness is to offer a witness to the world about the revelation of God in Jesus, “*so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*” (17:21). Jesus prays that the world will come to believe what the community already believes that Jesus is the one whom God has sent (“*I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on his behalf*” – 8:18). The church’s unity is for the

purpose of being a prophetic witness to the unbelieving world, inviting them to believe in the truth revealed by Christ. *“The visible unity and love of the disciples is testimony to the world of their being loved and transformed by the Father, through Jesus, whom he loved and sent for the world’s salvation.”* (Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV).

In Jesus’ glorification and in the events of the hour of his suffering, death, and resurrection, the character and identity of God are made know through Jesus’ love for God and for his own people (*“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”* – 13:1). The community’s oneness depends on Jesus’ gift to them of God’s glory and will complete God’s work in the same way that Jesus’ life and death fulfilled the Will of God, *“that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”* (17:23). The community’s oneness, like the Incarnation itself, makes visible and tangible the love of God. *“Jesus’ prayer is that God, Jesus, and the faith community will truly be one in love.”* (Gail O’Day).

Jesus’ prayer intensifies in its conclusion. Instead of the more conventional prayer language of “asking” (*erotao*), Jesus employs the language of volition in praying *“Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”* (17:24). In praying “I desire” (*thelo*), Jesus does not seek to do his own will, but the Will of God (*“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.”* – 4:34). The language of volition at the conclusion of this prayer underscores the confidence with which Jesus speaks to God and anticipates God’s response. All believers ultimately depend on the gift and grace of God (*“Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.”* – 6:37-38). Jesus’ vision is of the radical indwelling of God, Jesus, and the believers that will be a sign of God’s new age, a future that transcends and transforms human and divine community. Jesus’ words express a desire for the faith community to share in the glory that God and Jesus shared from the beginning; for *“from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”* (1:16).

- “To all who believe, the promise given for Christ’s sake and by the power of this prayer, that they shall be one body and one loaf with all Christians. They are promised that what happens to them for good or ill shall happen to the whole body for good or ill. Not only one or two saints, but all the prophets,

martyrs, apostles, all Christians, both on earth and with God in heaven, shall suffer and conquer with them, shall fight for them, help, protect, and save them, and shall undertake for them such a gracious exchange that they will all bear their sufferings, wants, and afflictions, and they will partake of all their blessings, comforts, and joys.” – Martin Luther, 1528.

Jesus’ address to God as “Righteous Father” (*pater dikaie*) identifies God as the eschatological judge, Jesus places the future of both the world and the faith community in God’s hands. Jesus summarizes the work of his ministry and points to his future work in the closing words of his prayer: “*I have made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*” (17:26). Jesus’ death and departure do not end his presence and work with the faith community; Jesus’ work continues in the work of the Paraclete, and Jesus is present in the indwelling of God, Jesus, and the community when the community live out the love of God that is present with them in Jesus Christ:

- “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love ... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” – 15:9-12.

The love of God for Jesus, the love of the Father for the Son, will continue in the life of the faith community, and through this love Jesus will also be present to the community. The community will become the locus of God’s love for the world, just as the Incarnate Word in Jesus Christ was that locus.

- “Jesus’ prayer for the community, then, models how the community is to understand and receive its identity in the world. It is to understand that its life rests in and depends on God’s care. In this prayer, Jesus does not supply pragmatic directives on how to arrive at church unity or how to recognize the face of the ‘evil one’ in the world. Rather, Jesus places the church’s future in the hands of God and invites the church to listen to that conversation. The church’s future is shown to be God’s, now ours. That is, the future of the church ultimately does not depend on or derives from the church’s own work, but rests with God.” – Gail O’Day.

The prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ is one that is addressed to Christians of all generations, including us as we gather this morning to celebrate Confirmation with

our young people who are affirming their baptismal promises this morning. It is a prayer for us to live out the covenant that God made with us in holy baptism, to experience the joy that is ours in the fellowship with God and with God's people that is God's gift for us. As we celebrate with our confirmands this morning, we are also invited to remember the promises we made on the day of our Confirmation to *"live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."* Confirmation is an occasion for celebration for our confirmands, for their families, and for our family of faith here at Zion; but it also reminds us that, in the words of the bishop that have stayed with me for decades, the *"its not about you,"* that the Church of Jesus Christ into which we have been baptized and in which we affirm our baptismal promises does not exist for our sake but for the sake of sharing the love of God in Jesus Christ with others. The purpose of the unity that is ours as sisters and brothers in Christ is not for our own sake, but for the sake of the world into which our Lord has called us.

- "The purpose, he says, of this perfection of oneness is not only an experience of divine love for us in our communion with God and one another. The purpose is beyond us. This being perfected in oneness is that the uncomprehending, sometimes dangerous world may also believe and know God's love in the sending of the Son ... Our love for God and one another becomes then an offering in and for the world to experience the love through which all creation has come into being." – Meda Stamper.

Jesus prays for the Church to fulfill his commission for this disciple community to be witnesses to the Good News of his death and resurrection, to be the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" that is sent out into the world to shine the light of Christ amid the darkness in which people dwell, to bring good news to a world overwhelmed by bad news, and to offer a message of life and hope in times of death and despair. The mission of the church is always beyond itself; it is a mission in which the church is called to *"go and make disciples of all nations"* (Matthew 28:19), to focus not on itself, its own survival, or the fulfillment of its own wishes and desires but to accomplish that for which Jesus taught us to pray, that *"thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* The prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ for his church in every age is that we remember that *"we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord; to care for all, without reserve, and spread his liberating word."* (ELW Hymn 729).

- “Christianity does have a mission to the world, and that mission is the most basic reason for the existence of the church. It is ‘sent out’ (that is what the word *apostolic* means), usually against its will, by the God who has called it into being, because of love for the world. The mission of the church is of central importance to Christian faith, so much so that it constitutes the most basic reason why the church must exist.” – Douglas John Hall.

Only a few people are called into ordained ministry, but all of us are called to serve as ministers in our daily lives through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are all born anew as children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ through water and the Word, and we are all endowed with gifts and talents that we use to strengthen the Body of Christ for its mission in the world. When we affirm our baptismal promises at Confirmation, we receive the blessing in which we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live and serve as God’s people in our daily lives, to fulfill Jesus’ command to “*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*” (Matthew 5:16). As we live together in this faith community into which we have been incorporated in Holy Baptism, we need to heed those same words that “*it’s not about you,*” that the purpose and mission of the church that has been entrusted to us is to fulfill the Will of our Lord Jesus Christ to be a community called to embody the love of God in Jesus Christ and to make a difference in a world that is yearning for the message that is our great treasure, the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

- “My favourite definition of the church comes from Karl Barth, who said, ‘[The Church] exists to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to the world’s own manner and which contradicts it in a way that is full of promise ... Having experienced the grace of God for ourselves, we wanted to dispense it to other, free of charge, no strings attached, as grace always comes. The church, I have learned, can indeed be a sign radically dissimilar to the world’s own manner, and contradict it in a way which is full of promise. For this reason, church is worth the bother.’” – Philip Yancey.

As we celebrate Confirmation with Ellen, Collin, and Kayla-Jean this morning, may we also remember our own Confirmations and heed the words that “*it’s not about you,*” that our call as a community of those who are baptized in Christ Jesus is to serve our Lord by loving one another, by fulfilling God’s Will in this place, by shining the light of Christ in all our words and deeds. May we strive to be a servant

church, a caring church that seeks to embody the love of Christ so that all the world may know the love of God that abides with us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.