

May 21, 2023
John 17:1-11

Easter 7
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“To You I Lift Up My Eyes”

“After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.’”

One of the required courses for first year students at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia was Liturgies, the study of the history and practice of worship in the Christian Church with a special focus on Lutheran liturgy. The course consisted of two parts: the academic study of the origins of liturgy and how it developed in the history of the church, and how Luther transformed some parts of the Roman Catholic Mass while keeping many of its main elements; and learning how to lead worship as future pastors. One element of this latter focus of the course was practicing how to lead Holy Communion, which involved meeting in the seminary chapel for hands-on practice. Our professor, Dr. Robert Hughes, decided to videotape the session so that we might review it in class to improve our worship leadership skills before we were called to lead Sunday worship in real-life settings. Dr. Hughes had the best of intentions, but what began as a teaching tool turned into a comedy reel that was filled with a wide variety of unintentional but hilarious errors. It began when the first student to take the position of presiding minister greeting the “congregation” (which consisted of the rest of the class who were waiting to take their turns on the altar) with “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the holy *saints* be with you all” – a very different way of presenting the Holy Trinity. The next unforced error came when another classmate tripped over his robe and went flying across the chancel; while he was unhurt, you could hear muffled laughter coming from the pews. Yet another classmate was trying his best to get through the communion prayer but kept tripping over his words and finally burst out into laughter at an otherwise solemn moment in the liturgy. I would like to report that I got through my turn at the altar unscathed, but alas that did not happen; as I was about to begin singing the proper preface (“*It is indeed right, our duty and our joy ...*”) my classmate standing next to me got lost and loudly began singing “*Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might*” I have no memory of doing this, but when we watched the tape, I saw that my outstretched hand gave him a slight tap on the cheek, and he stopped singing. But the highlight (or lowlight) of

the day came when my roommate, who had been battling laryngitis for days decided he was going to sing the liturgy, which finally caused the entire chapel to break into uncontrollable laughter. When we watched the tape in class the next day, it was like watching a comedy reel; after allowing us to view the entire debacle, Dr. Hughes summed up the experience by stating “*now you know how **not** to lead worship!*” As memorable as this experience was (for all the wrong reasons!) what I also remember was the importance of worship posture, the way our body motions corresponded with the words we were speaking. This was especially true during the prayers we were leading as presiding ministers; instead of folding our hands and bowing our heads, the way we had been taught to pray in Sunday school, we held out our arms with our palms raised, as one does when receiving a gift. At times in the service, we would turn our heads upward, looking up to heaven as we called upon God to come into our presence so that God might “*grace our table with your presence and give us a foretaste of the feast to come*” (*Lutheran Book of Worship*). We learned that our physical posture along with the words we spoke were both important aspects in expressing the meaning of the liturgy that we would lead as ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament.

I remembered this important lesson from my student days when I began reading today’s Gospel lesson from the Fourth Gospel. John 17 is known as the “High Priestly Prayer,” Jesus’ prayer on behalf of his disciples at the conclusion of his Farewell Discourse as he is about to undergo his passion and death in the hours to come. Farewell speeches such as this prayer were common in biblical literature; one of the best known is Moses’ farewell speech at the end of Deuteronomy:

- “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop like rain, my speech condenses like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth. For I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God!” – Deuteronomy 32:1-3.

Farewell speeches were also well known in the religious literature of the ancient Mediterranean world and would have been a familiar genre to the first readers of the Gospel. Jesus’ prayer in John 17, however, is not the conventional prayer of a dying man. It is not a death bed prayer, “*but the prayer of the One on the verge of willingly laying down his life and thus completing God’s work*” (Gail O-Day). Jesus’ prayer is the theological climax of the Fourth Gospel; it stands between his words to his disciples in the Farewell Discourse and the beginning of his passion story. The prayer thus stands at the pivotal turn in the context of Jesus’ last announcement that “*I have overcome the world*” (16:33). This is not a universal and timeless prayer of Jesus (like the Lord’s Prayer), but one decisively grounded and shaped by Jesus’

hour of suffering and death. Jesus prays in the confidence of the eschatological victory of his impending hour; he speaks of his departure as already accomplished. The prayer gives the reader a glimpse into the intimacy that marks the union of God and Jesus, for Jesus stops addressing his disciples directly and addresses himself to God.

As often as I have read and preached on this text, as I was preparing for this sermon I was struck by John's words of introduction before Jesus begins his prayer: "*After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven ...*" (17:1). Jesus begins his prayer with a customary Jewish gesture: he raised his eyes to heaven, following the words of the psalmist who proclaimed, "*to you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!*" (Psalm 123:1). The gesture of prayer was an important part of prayer in the Jewish tradition: the people raised their eyes and looked up in confidence that God would hear their prayers and would bless them with God's steadfast, loving presence. This gesture of looking up to heaven is a natural prelude to prayer, and Jesus practiced this gesture that he undoubtedly had learned in his Jewish upbringing at critical moments in his ministry:

- "Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly." – Mark 7:34-35.
- "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds." – Matthew 14:19.

Jesus looks up to heaven in full confidence that God will hear his prayers and will bless Jesus with the fullness of blessings that were expressed by the people of Israel as they would "*lift my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*" (Psalm 121:1-2). Jesus no longer includes those around him in his range of vision; his words, like his eyes, will be directed to God. The reader, like the disciples, is placed on the outside looking in as Jesus' prayer, using the direct address "Father" (*pater*) six times in the prayer. By addressing the Father directly, Jesus offers a glimpse of the intimacy between them that was previously seen in his raising of Lazarus from the dead:

- "And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.'" – 11:41-42.

One aspect of Jesus' prayer that differs from his prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane in the Synoptic Gospels is that there is no hint of "agony at his hour (*"I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake"* – Mark 14:34), because Jesus recognizes the hour of his passion and death as the ultimate purpose of his work and the completion of his revelation of God: *"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him."* (17:1b-2). Jesus' glory, like the rest of his ministry, derives from God. In Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, the glory of God – God's identity – will be made visible, fulfilling his words to his adversaries that *"when you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I did nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me."* (8:28).

The "eternal life" of which Jesus speaks is the primary description of the gift that Jesus brings to those who believe in him, a teaching that has been emphasized throughout the Fourth Gospel:

- "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." – 1:4.
- "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." – 3:16.
- "The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." – 4:14.
- "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." – 10:10.

Jesus' glorification completes the revelation of God as Father and hence *"the only true God."* To know this God is to have eternal life (*"This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."* – 6:40). Jesus emphasizes his work as the completion of God's work and the revelation of God's glory, so that in his coming passion God might *"glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed"* (17:5). Jesus' call to be glorified through his death *"names his crucifixion as a moment of triumph for him but most importantly a moment of affirmation of his divinity for his disciples."* (Jennifer Benjamin Brooks).

While Jesus' eyes and words are directed towards God, it is a "high priestly prayer" in that Jesus' prayer is for the sake of the disciples from whom he will soon depart. Jesus summarizes his entire ministry by stating that *"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world."* (17:6). Jesus' disciples were given to him by God; they have received knowledge of the relationship of God and Jesus from Jesus' revelation, so that *"now they know that everything you have given me is*

from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.” (17:7-8).

- “Unlike the model of the Lord’s Prayer, this prayer seems more instructive to the disciples about who they are and who Jesus is in their lives. The prayer reads like a narrative of Jesus’ role and Saviour and guide, as leader and example for the present disciples and those yet to come. It moves from his incarnation through his ministry and leads to this upcoming passion. His intercession on behalf of the disciples offers a mode of prayer whereby one makes intercession for others.” – Brooks.

Jesus’ prayers are for those whom God gave him, not for the “world” (*kosmos*), which in John stands for the sphere of enmity to God (“*The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.*” – 7:7). Jesus is going to send his disciples to the hostile, unbelieving world as an extension of his own mission (“*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” – 20:21). Through their visible unity, faithfulness, and love, they bear witness to the reality of the Father’s love in Jesus, so that the world may come to believe and be redeemed.

- “The dualism of the Johannine community poses a challenge for us. The term ‘world’ most often refers to a dangerous, hostile place that opposes God’s hopes for justice and mercy. In this passage Jesus prays not for the whole world but for those whom he has taught and guided into knowledge and love of God. He prays confidently for their (and our) protection in a hostile world.” – Nancy J. Ramsay.

As a result of the coming of his hour of suffering and death, Jesus leaves the world to go to God, while his disciples remain in this hostile world: “*And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.*” (17:11a). Jesus’ absence from the world and his return to God are the defining realities of the future lives of his disciples. While the world hates the disciples because of their relationship to Jesus (“*If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you*” – 15:18), the Father loves them for the same reason (“*Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*” – 14:23). Since the disciples will experience the world’s attacks, Jesus asks the Father to keep protecting them, and Jesus himself did while physically present among them: “*Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.*” (17:11b). Jesus’ revelation of God’s “name” – God’s identity and character – shaped the identity of the faith

community during his ministry, and now he asks that God keep secure the community's grounding in that name. The purpose of this request ("so that," *hina*) is to ensure the unity of the faith community, which mirrors the unity of God and Jesus "*as we are one.*" The basis for the unity among the disciples is the unity between the Father and the Son ("*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*" – Ephesians 4:4-6). Their invisible communion with God becomes visible in their earthly community of faith and love, the Church. The world's attacks are going to threaten the disciples' unity, seeking to break their communion with Jesus and to affiliate with the world and its ways of rebellion, sin, and hatred ("*And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.*" – 3:19).

- "The unity of divided humanity is the will of God. For this reason he sent his Son, so that by dying and rising for us he might bestow on us the Spirit of love. On the eve of his sacrifice on the Cross, Jesus himself prayed to the Father for his disciples and for all those who believe in him, that they might be one, a living communion. This is the basis not only of the duty, but also the responsibility before God and his plan, which falls to those who through Baptism become members of the Body of Christ, a Body in which the fullness of reconciliation and communion must be present." – Pope John Paul II.

Jesus' High Priestly Prayer (which continues through 17:26) is a prayer which Jesus offers to the Father on behalf of his followers who will continue his ministry after his departure. It is a prayer that "*extends beyond the disciples referenced in the text to the followers of Christ over time, into today and beyond into the future. Jesus' prayer is offered in the assurance that God hears and God answers.*" (Brooks). As Jesus raised his eyes toward heaven knowing that God would hear his prayer and that God would act on behalf of those for whom we pray, we are also invited to lift our eyes toward God in confidence that God will hear us, and that God will abide with us always. The hostile world into which Jesus would send his disciples is still a world that is hostile to God's Word and to those who would live according to it; but as Jesus prays that God will abide with his disciples so that they might continue his mission of proclaiming the Good News to this very world that God loves even when it was not loving to God in return. We need not cast our eyes downward as if we are unworthy of God's love and God's blessing; as with God's people of every age, it is "*to you I lift up my eyes,*" knowing that God is with us always and will bless us with the assurance that God will protect us in God's name so that we might

be one people as we share the blessings of God that are meant for all people by our Lord Jesus Christ, who is *Lord of all*.

Amen.