

7 Easter, Year B,                      John 17:6-19  
Christ Church, Glen Allen      May 17, 2015  
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This past Thursday was a major feast day in the Church, though you might have missed it. These days very few churches have a service for the Feast of the Ascension. When Jesus ascended into the clouds, there was something almost like a Star Trek kind of beaming up! Here is the account from Acts - as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Many artists have portrayed this event with only the feet of Jesus visible at the top of their paintings – two bare feet sticking out of the bottom of the clouds! It's a strange story and it's told only in Luke's Gospel and in Acts - and yet this event is documented in both the Apostles' and Nicene creeds. "He ascended into heaven". There is something about this that frees Jesus from any time or space limitations that we as humans want to construct. It is precisely because Jesus is not bound by time or space that he can be present with us at all times and in all places.

Even so, imagine for a moment how those disciples must have felt as Jesus ascended, leaving them behind. Surely there was some sadness, some fear and anxiety, and maybe a sense of hopelessness. I can still remember all too well being a child and given a helium-filled balloon, and being told to hold it tightly. But as I held it, my little fist would get sweaty, or my attention would wander, and then the balloon would escape from my hand and ascend to the heavens. And there were feelings of sadness and utter hopelessness as I watched it disappear.

As we grow older we may have a similar sense of loss when a friend or loved one has died unexpectedly and we regret all the things we meant to say to them and never did. Or perhaps it's that job we should have taken, that investment we should have made, that college we should have attended. There are also those losses we experience when the course of change loosens our tight, sweaty grip on what has always been. We can all name those escaped balloons in our lives – those things that seem to have slipped from our grasp.

I'm guessing the disciples probably wanted to go with Jesus into heaven instead of remaining in the world with all its problems. And I dare say many of us have had similar thoughts when the world weighs heavy on us and things aren't going the way we thought they would. Change and anxiety are uncomfortable.

Even here at Christ and Grace, there may be some anxiety and uncertainty after all the change over the past year. We may wonder why attendance has declined, or how we will fund some much-needed deferred maintenance. And who wouldn't love to see our many Sunday School classrooms filled with children again? What lies before us is uncertain, but we can be certain that we do not face it alone.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus knew that the disciples would be troubled by the events of his death, by the changes their lives would undergo, by the adjustments they would need to make when he was no longer physically present with them. Jesus knew this world would be full of hard things and that is why, before his death, he shared a meal with the disciples to prepare them for what was to come. At this meal, Jesus prays for his friends, interceding to God on their behalf.

But what exactly is Jesus praying for his disciples? He asks God to protect them, and prays that the disciples be one as he and the Father are one – this is unity. Jesus prays that the disciples may have his joy made complete in themselves – the joy of unity... because God knows how unjoyful disunity can be! Jesus has great concern and love for the disciples and so he entrusts them to God. He does not pray that it will be easy. He knows all too well that it won't be. Jesus knows this world operates with a sense of scarcity instead of abundance, fear instead of courage, and selfishness instead of sacrificial love.

The good news is that Jesus does not ask these things for his disciples only. If we were to read just a few verses more, we would hear Jesus praying this in verse 20 - "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those *who will believe* in me through their word." – that's us! Jesus prays that we *all* may be one in fellowship with God and with one another. When we gather together to hear the word and to be fed at the table, we find strength and courage to face our challenges. Gathering in the presence of Christ is what holds us together, keeps us as one, in unity with God and one another.

To know that Jesus is praying for us is an astounding thing! Think about that! As he models prayer for us, he takes us into the very presence of God. Jesus prays for us in the same way that we are to pray for one another, because prayer is essential for unity. Prayer is when we entrust to God all those things that bring fear and anxiety, all those challenges of life, and it's often in our time of need or anxiety that God will break through to us.

Jesus has promised us that we will not be left comfortless. Christ, who is not bound by time or space, continues to call us to be transformed and to do the transforming work of God. Here at Christ and Grace we can see this going on in every area of our common life. In the beauty of worship, in our newly planted outreach garden, in the joy of our youth programming, and in our community engagement through events like our Celtic Services. This transforming work happens because the work of Christ will not be bound by our current circumstances! Yes, we have some critical needs – roof repair, worn carpet, and window restoration. Our building will always be in need of maintenance, and it's only part of what has been entrusted to us, but it is part of our ministry to keep it in good order so that it can continue to provide us a place to gather in unity and respond to the prayers Jesus prays for us.

Whenever we find ourselves fearful or anxious, whether it is about a personal problem, a catastrophic world event, or the ongoing needs at Christ and Grace, are we remembering to stop and pray? Are we remembering that Jesus abides here with us? Are we willing to be changed by our prayers? Note that in our Acts reading today, which follows the account of the ascension of Jesus, the disciples got down to the business of being the church, naming a replacement for Judas so that the ministry could continue. We are no less called to continue what Jesus began.

Maybe those artists were not so crazy after all to portray the ascension with the feet of Jesus hanging from the bottom of the clouds where we can see them! Jesus is not bound by any time or space limitations. Jesus is still with us, and is also with God, praying with us and for us always.

So, now that we know all that.... what is Jesus praying for each one of us? What is Jesus praying for Christ and Grace?

Amen.