

Seventh Sunday in Easter  
Acts 16:16-34, Psalm 97, John 17:20-26  
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Beside the presidential nominee races, the other story that has most captured the media recently seems to be about the musical artist Prince. First we learned of his sudden death, then the fact that he didn't have a will to pass on his fortune and, finally, that prescription pain killers may have contributed to his death.

It may come as a surprise to you, but our Book of Common Prayer, at the end of the short service titled, *A Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child*, has the following statement.

*The Minister of the Congregation is directed to instruct the people from time to time, about the duty of Christian parents to make prudent provision for the well-being of their families, and of all persons to make wills, while they are in health, arranging for the disposal of their temporal goods, not neglecting, if they are able, to leave bequests for religious and charitable uses. (P. 445)*

It is hard to imagine no one advised Prince to make plans for the disposal of his several hundred million dollars of assets in the unfortunate case of his death. Maybe he and some of us ignore or put off this important task as a way of not wanting to think about our own death.

As the minister of this congregation, I urge you to have a will drawn up soon if you have not already done so.

Jesus had no need for a will because he had nothing temporal to give away. Maybe the closest thing Jesus did have, however, as a Last Will and Testament is included in today's gospel reading from John. These verses from Chapter 17 are part of a rather lengthy prayer Jesus offers for his disciples and later followers such as us. It takes place shortly after he has washed his disciples' feet and commanded them to love one another on the evening he is arrested.

So what did Jesus want to leave us in some of his last words before dying on the cross?

- He wants us to be in the close-knit relationship he and his Father have. He wants us to be in them.
- He wants us to have the same glory that the Father has given him. In other words, we are to reveal the divinity of the Father and the Son.
- He wants us to be completely one with him and the Father.
- Jesus wants us to be where he is. We presume that is to be where he will be after he dies, is resurrected, and ascends to heaven.

- He wants us to see his glory, perhaps as it will be revealed on the cross.
- Finally, Jesus wants us to have the same love in us that he had from the Father.

While a lot of these sound like the same thing in slightly different words, the sentiment is unmistakable. Jesus wants us to have nothing less than all he has. Could any inheritance be better than that?

One of my many favorite prayers in our worship services is the Prayer of Thanksgiving after communion when we pray, *Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our Savior, Jesus Christ...* or in the other version, *...we thank you....for assuring us in these holy mysteries that we are living members of the Body of your Son, and heirs of your eternal kingdom.*

Our inheritance as followers of Jesus is to be part of him both in this life and in the next. The Holy Communion reminds us of this most generous gift each week.

We know that Christians have not been one with each other over the centuries. I do believe that more than any other time in the past, Christians today are trying to find common ground across denominational differences. While we don't all worship the same way or practice our faith in lock step with one another, we are still ultimately united. The late great Methodist preacher E. Stanley Jones once said, "Talk about what you believe, and you have disunity. Talk about who you believe in and you have unity."

We are one as Christians because of Jesus and what he did for all of us. If Jesus is not at the center of who we are and how we behave, then we best not call ourselves Christian in the first place.

This leads me into that incredible -- if a little lengthy -- story from the Acts of the Apostles. Paul and Silas are preaching Jesus in the Roman city of Philippi, found in present-day Turkey. A certain slave girl with fortune-telling powers follows them around for days crying out that they are servants of the Most High God with a means of salvation. She's telling the truth, but she just won't quit. In an odd twist of behavior, Paul casts her spirit out not because he cares about the welfare of the girl, but because she is bugging them to death.

Paul and Silas were tolerated by the populace until some influential merchants realized their lucrative little profit-making asset has been decommissioned. Now Paul and Silas get accused of going from preaching to meddling, and the full weight of the law is brought down upon them. They are severely beaten and then placed in the maximum security portion of the local jail.

After they regain consciousness, count up their broken bones and discover what a dire predicament they are in, utter despair sets in and they cry out, “Woe is me! or “I’ll get you for this, you... expletive deleted!”

Oh wait, that’s not how the story goes. That’s what most people would do under the same circumstances. Paul and Silas actually start singing the doxology: *Praise God from whom all blessings flow.*

Is there a lesson here? When we’re tempted to slip into self-pity, sing praises. When we’re inclined to express rage, rejoice in the Lord.

I write my sermons on Thursday mornings. This past week I was in Richmond that rainy evening and the traffic on every street around VCU was crawling. I was ready to scream when I remembered my sermon. I tried to sing instead and was able to calm down and get to my destination eventually.

I don’t think this can or will happen unless we nurture a habit of gratitude and thanksgiving to God all the time. Paul and Silas can sing in chains, pain, and deep darkness at midnight because they have Jesus squarely at the center of their lives.

Furthermore, they don’t use the earthquake as an opportunity to escape their misfortune because they are always free in Christ.

The jailer’s life is spared and his entire household is baptized because Paul and Silas don’t act like normal human beings who just want to save their own skins. They act like exceptional human beings who want to save other peoples’ skins and souls.

If we could act like exceptional human beings more of the time because Jesus is in us and we are in him, how many souls might we save? AMEN.