

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, NM
Sunday June 2, 2019 Easter 7C
John 17:20-26
A Chain of Belonging

Jesus is with his disciples at their final supper and this is a kind of last will and testament. Jesus is talking with his friends and praying to the Father at the same time. He's preparing them for his death and he offers a prayer that is rich and complex and sometimes hard to penetrate.

There is grief in this prayer, as Jesus will be taken from his followers and the weeping Mary Magdalene at his tomb searching for his body is a poignant reminder of his physical loss. On one level, Jesus' departure is a fulfillment of his mission. He is going back to the Father. He came from the Father, completed his work and is now returning.

On another level, Jesus' death is the fullest revelation of the Glory of God to his friends. In death, the eternal life that is the inner being of Jesus meets and transcends the limits of ordinary life. In doing so, Jesus' wounds become streams of life to his followers and a proclamation that death is not the end but rather life is, through a love that is stronger than death. In the end, Jesus becomes not a dead messiah but a source of ongoing life to all who love him and are drawn into his spiritual presence.

This is pretty heady stuff. The loss of Jesus' physical presence with his disciples through death unfolds into something mysterious and wonderful, a new interior spiritual presence with them always. He was always the 'Word made Flesh' God with flesh on among them, but now that the flesh has faded, he is with the disciples in a new way. His spiritual presence continues with his friends in an intimate and surprisingly beautiful way. Jesus and his Father indwell the disciples, creating a community of friends who love one another, and one that invites a broken and wounded world into that same experience of oneness.

It's a beautiful image really. The disciples are not alone, they have the real spiritual presence of Jesus and his beloved Father with them and it both unites them and urges them out into the world to share this connection. This is a picture of how the Christian community is to operate in the world.

Just as Jesus is in the Father, he desires that we are also in him—and that we are all one with each other, with Jesus, and with God.

"Being in Jesus" is John's theological language to describe a state of communion essential for our faith. In the Eastern church, Christians view this state of communion as salvation

itself—something that can happen throughout our lives, not just when we die. It's a state of being so intimately connected to Christ that this connection shapes everything about who we are and how we live our lives.

Many of our spiritual mothers and fathers believed this intimate connection could be accomplished through prayer and meditation. If you repeat a phrase of scripture or a prayer mantra long enough, it will eventually shape your heart and your life.

Jesus' prayer stretches into the future, he prays not only for those in front of him, his first friends and companions, but also for those who will discover the love of God through their witness and words, those second friends whose faith will come through others. In doing this, Jesus is envisioning a kind of human chain of connection. The first friends of Jesus communicated something of their own interior life with Jesus to others and that word became a seed inside of them, that invited them to enter into that same heart-centered relationship with God in Christ. It's really interesting to consider how many generations of friends sharing their love of Christ, their spiritual relationship with Jesus have gone before each of us. Who was in the chain of belonging to Christ for you? Who shared a truthful word with you about the love of God that made a difference in who you are today?

Jesus' prayer is describing something about our very own spiritual lives and lineage here. He's telling us something beautiful about what it means to be a disciple. The first friends of Jesus gather other people into themselves, and through themselves into Jesus, and through Jesus into the heart of God where the flow of life and love into all of God's children originates. It's a beautiful network of relationships to consider, a web of connection and unity that stretches back to the first friends of Jesus. We are among those who know something about the goodness of Christ in our own lives, have shared with others and have learned and known it from earlier friends of Jesus. All of this means that there is a kind of unity or oneness that Jesus talks about with those who have discovered and shared the life and love of God. We are not strangers in this building, in this community we are kindred spirits alive to the life and love of the Father just as Jesus is. To the degree that we manifest this connection and beauty of oneness we call attention to the brokenness of the world and invite it into healing.

Jesus' prayer is amazing. He not only prays for those who will hear his voice through the voices of others and enter into relationship with his Father, he also prays for everyone who needs to hear his voice, those who live in loneliness and darkness and are captive to the powers of death. Jesus' prayer has a profound outward push. It doesn't establish a group it inaugurates a mission. The love of God poured into our hearts is intended to be shared.

For John, communion with Christ is essential because it leads us to being in communion with others. If we love God and if we are communing with God, then this will lead us to

loving and communing with our brothers and sisters. If we love God and are communing with God then we will find God in one another. You may remember that St. Francis said, “Preach the good news. Use words if necessary.” In other words, it is the way of being alive, deeper than what is said or claimed, that ultimately attracts people and changes the world.

The community of St. Mark’s is a blessing to many. Over and over again I’ve been privileged to hear people’s stories about how they were going through a difficult time and needed spiritual sustenance. They were invited to come and worship at St. Mark’s or wandered into this place through God’s leading on Google. What they found was a balm to their soul. A place where they could sense the presence of God at work in them, binding up their wounds and drawing them into fellowship and community, a place where they could be real and where others were real as well.

Jesus prays that we are in him, but also that we recognize him in one another— “so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” If we can be in Jesus and see Jesus in one another, then this will be our greatest witness to the world that Christ’s Spirit is alive and working among us.

One of the core practices at St. Mark’s is something so simple that it is one of the most radical things that we do. It’s not a program but a practice. It’s not magic, but rather the intentional and hard work of getting to know one another one on one over time. For many years now, St. Mark’s has engaged in the practice of relational meetings or one on one conversations throughout the summer and really throughout the year to deepen the relational fabric of this community. What people have found is that listening to one another they begin to see where God is at work in others and that in turn illuminates where God is at work within them as well. It is a practice that leads to some of the oneness and connection that Jesus is talking about in this heady mysterious passage from John’s gospel.

So, this day I want to invite and challenge you to talk to one another, to take the risk to be curious about the person who worships near you and find some time to get to know one another.

This summer a group of adventurous members of St. Mark’s have committed to an initiative we are call the **Summer of Conversation**. It is a simple but radical idea. This past week a group of more than 25 members of St. Mark’s met to do some training in how to have intentional conversations and to explore the art of a relational meeting. We plan to do more training on the last Wednesday in June as well. In short, we’ve been learning the **spiritual practice of sacred conversation** – the art of having conversations that really matter, conversations that could change us, and help us know the people of God with whom we worship and play and learn and will deepen our relationships and sense of community and belonging here at St. Mark’s.

Our hope is to have at least 300 conversations or more with people in our parish for 30 or 45 minutes each over the next few months – thus the **Summer of Conversation**. It is an ambitious undertaking and we want to invite you into this adventure. We want to be part of creating a thick network of relationships at St. Mark's that makes this church different and deeply engaging. The plan is simple really, to meet with members and newcomers and those whom we don't know well, to listen, ask questions, share important stories and become lovingly curious about each other's lives. The hope is that together we will discover where God is at work in our lives and in the community of St. Mark's.

Just as Jesus' beautiful prayer calls us into a depth of community,

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us. (John 17: 21)

I believe that the radical work of getting to know one another through intentional conversation is the work of a whole community that will truly change us. For in taking the risk to greater intimacy and understanding with one another we will create the kind of community that we actually are longing for, a community that this beautiful image of God's relational being beckons us toward. In welcoming one another we create a place of deep hospitality that is capable of transforming our community through discovering the presence of Christ in one another. **Amen.**