

One

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
May 28, 2017
Seventh Sunday of Easter– Year A

John 17:1-11



The supper is over, the bread and wine consumed, the disciples' feet still clean from being washed. Judas has departed to work his evil. And you remember from a couple of weeks ago how John narrates, "And it was night." You remember that for John day and night, light and dark, are always about more than the time of day.

Night is that time when everything you thought was true and real seems up for grabs. Night is that moment when courage wants to flee. Night is when we are tempted to scatter, each to our own homes, cover our heads, look out for ourselves. Night is when all the promises of love seem untrustworthy. Night is when Judas betrays. Night is when disciples sleep while Jesus' sweat falls like drops of blood in the garden. Night is when Peter denies. Night is when disciples – all of them – flee. And it was night.

A voice pierces the darkness. "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." He tells them he is going away and they cannot come, but they know the way to the place where he is going. You remember Thomas protesting, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life..."

You remember Philip saying, "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

"How can you say, 'Show us the Father?' If you have seen me, you have seen the Father."

Still they do not understand. It is hard to comprehend in the night. Jesus speaks to them, and speaks, and speaks. For three chapters, he talks, and every word he says is intended to help them go out into the night, to understand that even though it is dark, they need not be afraid. He says he is the true vine and God the vine grower and they are the vines. They are bound to him and he is bound to God.

In chapter 16, when he comes to the end, he takes a breath and says, “I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father.” In response, the disciples say, “No, we understand now, we get it.” And Jesus says, “Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed it has now come, when you will be scattered...”

In her book, “Rising Strong,” Brene Brown describes what she calls “the arena.” The arena is that place where we are doing something that makes us emotionally, physically, or spiritually vulnerable. It is the place where we can fall, can fail. She writes, “I want to be in the arena. I want to be brave with my life. I want to dare greatly.”

But when we are in the arena, there will come a point when we will find ourselves face down in the arena. It will be, in other words, night. And everything in us will want to remain there, to hide, to wait for the crowd to leave us alone. And one of the lessons for us in that place is that we cannot do this alone, we were never meant to live isolated.

It is at night, when the disciples are face down in the arena, confused, frightened, and feeling alone that Jesus offers them a wondrous gift. He prays for them.

Earlier in the service, after we confessed our sins together on behalf of the world, in the moments of silence in which we confessed our sins to God directly, perhaps describing the ways we too have been face down in the arena, we heard these words:

“Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ. And Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, *Christ prays for us...*”

If we fully understood the power of those four words – Christ prays for us – if we trusted them to be true, would it not, as one writer says, cause us to “live differently, less afraid, bolder, more joyfully?”

There is really only one gospel message in John, one theme he returns to again and again: Jesus reveals God to us. Jesus is the face of God. This is the gospel, and to believe it – to trust it – is to experience eternal life here and now. “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” The word “know” means much more than simply “know about,” but to have a relationship. Eternal life is to be in relationship to God, whom we see revealed in Jesus Christ.

When we see Jesus bend to wash his disciples’ feet and we respond by washing one another’s feet, we are experiencing eternal life. When we hear Jesus say to the men surrounding the woman caught in adultery, “Let he who is without sin cast the first

stone,” and we respond by becoming a forgiving people, we are experiencing eternal life. When we see Jesus standing alone with the Samaritan woman at the well, speaking words of life to one outcast and estranged and we respond by becoming reconcilers, reaching out to those who have no voice, we are experiencing eternal life.

And when we see Jesus take up his cross and we respond by taking up our own, following him into the arena of the world with a message of love and peace that flows from the cross, the very heart of God, we are experiencing eternal life.

This is what Jesus is praying for when he prays for us – not that we will go to heaven when we die, but that we will experience the glory of God, the eternal life of the Son, in the here and now, and in so doing, be a blessing to this world God loves and for which Christ died.

Jesus prays for us. Everything in his prayer then and now shows the initiative belongs solely to God. Jesus asks God to protect, guide, uphold, and reveal. In the end, we are not able, by our own power, to trust, to follow, to be the body Christ calls us to be. It is only by God’s grace that we stand. But stand we do, because Christ prays for us.

Just last week, another group of Coptic Christians were killed in Egypt by, we believe, the Islamic State. When they were taken off the bus and made to stand outside with guns to their heads, they were asked to abandon their faith in Christ, to relinquish their trust in the presence of fear. According to numerous reports, they refused, and as a result gave up their lives.

They were connected, by faith, with the victims of the Charleston, South Carolina murders, whose families stood in the courtroom only days after their loved ones were massacred and spoke words of forgiveness to the killer.

They were connected, by faith, with the Amish community many years ago who responded to a man who killed a church full of children by not only forgiving him, but including his family when they were raising money for the victims.

They were connected, by faith, with the people of South Africa, who, as a nation, decided after Apartheid ended, not to respond with revenge against their fellow citizens, but embarked on a long process called Truth and Reconciliation, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who said, “Without forgiveness, there is no future.”

They were connected, by faith, with us, any time we have responded to division with unity, any time we have practiced forgiveness, any time we have chosen love over hate.

This is what eternal life looks like in the here and now. This is what Jesus prayed for and prays for. Jesus prays for us.

You get in the arena, you make yourself vulnerable, because you know, deep down, you are held, protected, valued. Jesus prays for you.

Listen to what he says, about you and me: “All mine are yours and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them...Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given to me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Jesus prays that we be bound as closely in relationship to one another as he is bound to God, that the reality of the oneness of God would be our reality, and that we would live in the protection and strength of that unity.

As a pastor, I get asked a lot about the survival of the church. “Do you think the church will make it, will survive?” And I admit, as a pastor, I can get fixated on that question, drawn to all manner of program and quick-fix promises that if you will just do this one thing, your church will survive into the 21st century. But in my better moments, my clearer moments, I realize that the question of the church’s survival is such a small question, given the immensity of our God. It is such a small question, given the fact that Jesus prays for us. In my better moments, my answer to that question is, “I care less about whether we live or whether we die than that we live, truly live, while we are alive.

To me that means getting in the arena, that means going outside these walls to engage with the world in all its messiness and need, that means risking the vulnerability of love and connection here and now. Eternal life is what I’m interested in the church experiencing, here and now. Because Christ prays for us, we need not be afraid. We need not be divided. We are one.

Archbishop Tutu also said, “God’s dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.” Another great theologian, Bono, sings, “We’re one, but we’re not the same. We get to carry each other, carry each other. One.”

Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life is gone. A new life has begun. Let us together get into the arena of the mission of God. Let us lay hold of new life, eternal life. We can, because Christ prays for us. Amen.