

In John 17, this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus is ending his ministry on this earth. It is the night of the passover meal. He has greeted his disciples, he has washed their feet as a servant and he has urged them to rethink what they understand about power relationships between masters and servant. He has told them that he comes from God and going to return to God very soon. He tells them not to worry, to not be afraid because Jesus, with God, is in control of the world even though it might not look that way all the time. He tells the disciples that he will be sending an Advocate, an ongoing presence of God and Jesus that will live with us and in us. Jesus may leave the disciples in his physical form, but God and Jesus will remain with them and all who follow the disciples in faith which includes you and me in this room right now this morning. The Advocate is here this morning, in us and among us.

In this morning's reading from the 17th chapter of John, Jesus is finishing his final set of teachings before he goes out to be arrested by the Roman soldiers. Judas is on his way, returning with the centurions having sold Jesus' location for a bag of coins. When we hear this morning's reading, we should be thinking about the sound of the marching cadence as the soldiers and Jesus' friend move from the palace toward the rented room.

In John's Gospel, there's an urgency of experience. We, who read this gospel both in the century it was written and now, are intended to experience Jesus through these words, this story, as if we were there in person at the time. Dr. Sandra Schneiders reminds us that the Gospel of John's catchphrase, the Gospel team motto if you will, is "written so that you may believe." For the writer of John's Gospel, this story is the first century version of virtual reality. We may not be in the exact room with Jesus 2000 years ago, but if we listen attentively and use our imagination, we can experience Jesus' presence as if we were actually there.

And thus we too can come to faith in Jesus and the God who sent Jesus.

And through that faith, we can claim not only Jesus' presence and comfort in our life today but also our future home in that house with many rooms that Jesus said he was preparing for all of us. Our own stories do not end with our death, Jesus tells the disciples and tells us. Our own stories will continue in Glory, in God's presence - which is love itself. Unconditional love. Peace, Jesus says to the disciples. My Peace I leave with you.

I wonder what that Peace feels like sometimes.

Because, sometimes I don't feel that Peace. I feel scared. I feel wrong. I feel like a failure, or someone who is about to fail. And I think Jesus knows that about me. Jesus

certainly knew that about the disciples that night he was arrested. "You are going to deny me three times, my brother Peter," he said that night. "The hour is coming, indeed it has come when you will be scattered. Each one to his home and you will leave me alone."

And if we can read this Gospel with our imagination, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit sent by Jesus, then we can imagine ourselves sitting at a table with Jesus. Who has been the most amazing human being we've ever known. There's something compelling about this man who keeps acting in unexpected ways. When Jesus speaks with the woman at the well, we're surprised because, men don't speak with women like that. Certainly not an unknown woman, and even more certainly not an unknown, Samaritan woman and yet, he did that. And somehow, it was okay. It changed us to see him talking to her like that. It challenged everything we thought we knew about who was okay to converse with, who was safe to talk to and there he was - blowing all our rules right out the door. He made it different somehow. I mean sure, he healed people which was amazing like that lame man near the pool and the blind man not too far away. But... it wasn't the healing so much as it was the teaching. What Jesus talked about. What Jesus is talking about this night at this meal. There they all are, in a room somewhere. Probably sitting on the floor with pillows to cushion the hardness. The remains of the lamb stew in bowls atop a rug. Bread torn into pieces, wine half drunk in cups. Small lamps flickering to push back the darkness. We are in this room, in our imagination.

Love one another, Jesus has been teaching the disciples and ourselves. Don't worry about your position in society, don't worry if people are showing you respect or not. Worry about who is going hungry. Worry about who is orphaned and in need of shelter. Worry about who is in prison and in need of comfort and the chance for redemption. Love each other, love me, and love God who is the source of Love itself.

Its like Jesus might be saying, "Don't worry if you are good enough. That's not important." Jesus did say, "You did not choose me but I choose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last so that the father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." The disciples were not interviewed. None of them submitted a resume or CV and none of them took a drug test. They were all pretty much minding their own business, not unlike ourselves, when Jesus called them by name. A compelling invitation that changed everything they knew about themselves and about the world and changed nothing that Jesus knew about them. Jesus knew who they were and Jesus knows who we are and Jesus invites us to love. To love God. To love one another and to love ourselves if we need to.

Jesus knows who we are and still Jesus is talking to us. Jesus really really knows who we are, better than we do even, and still Jesus desires our company. There is love for us here. Love that can call us into our best selves, but loves us anyway even if we change nothing. Go figure. Jesus is radical. Jesus does not pay attention to the cultural rules we create, especially the ones that create pain. Its risky business to start talking to Jesus.

When we read this Gospel with our imagination, we are in Jesus' presence. The disciples were often surprised by Jesus. Almost everything they thought they knew about how to best serve God, how to be a person of honor in their culture was turned upside down by Jesus, and so are we, when we take this story seriously. Even today, our world is in need of Jesus' love, Jesus radical vision of life together because the world is still organized in fear, in rules that separate us from each other, from our true selves, from God.

This morning's passage comes from the last free hours of Jesus' life - the last few hours before his arrest - but one of the compelling truths about Jesus was that he was always free. He belonged to God. And it didn't matter if he was walking down the road, sharing dinner with Mary and Martha, or sitting in a Roman prison cell. All of those settings are transient moments. They start and then they end but Jesus knows he belongs to something larger than any moment.

We see, with the disciples when we read the Gospel of John with our imagination active, we see how Jesus is not bound by his settings. We see that Jesus is free at all times and all places and that we too can be free. Free of our fear, free of our guilt, free of our pain and losses and physical powers and physical limitations because everything that binds us is of the world. Like Jesus, we also belong to God. We belong to God because Jesus asks God to hold on to us. Every morning we wake up to read the news we need to remember who we belong to, we need to remember that the whole world is actually free, like Jesus, if only we could trust that freedom. All our pain and in this I mean everyone Christian and not Christian, all our suffering and all the ways this world is broken is because we have a hard time remembering to whom we belong. We have a hard time remembering that we are free because we are loved.

Now here we are. In this tiny little room with the disciples and Jesus. He has been teaching everyone one last time. Now he is lifting his face toward the ceiling, the top of the room, toward God and he begins to pray. We know the centurions and Judas are closing in. Maybe just a few blocks away. Anyone out in the streets are quickly disappearing into doorways and down hidden alleyways. Nothing good happens when the soldiers march.

But here is Jesus, standing before us and praying. Jesus is praying for us. All of us. "I have made your name known to those you have given me," he says to God. "I am no longer here," Jesus says, "but they remain and they need your protection," Jesus says. "Treat these disciples and everyone who has faith in our story, as if they were me."

Jesus is praying to God, asking God to extend the same care, the same love, the same attentive presence to all of us as if we were also Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I know for a fact that I am not Jesus. Nor will anyone ever mistake me for Jesus. I know for a fact that I am broken, as broken as the disciple who is now just down the street from this house we are in, this room where Jesus is praying for him and for all of us. I am as broken as the disciple who is marching right there, right along with the centurions, guiding them and their swords and their knives to the only direct channel of God's love the world has ever known to that moment. I am as broken as Judas and still, Jesus prays for me. Jesus asks God to treat me with the same love and care as if I was Jesus. Jesus prays that God would see me the same as Jesus, that God will see me... will see us... as if we are one together.

Who does that?

A man who was always free. A man who saw the world as God sees it. A man who is God among us somehow but still, a man. We need to remember that Jesus was human as well as God so that we can remember how radical, how life changing it was to experience Jesus in person. Which we are doing right now with the help of the Gospel of John and the Holy Spirit here now among us.

Jesus will be arrested and he will die and Peter and the disciples will be shattered. They will deny Jesus, and they will hide until they are too hungry to do anything but go back to their old ways. Fishing. All night long with nothing but net. Until the morning comes and they see the impossible - Jesus setting up a huge fish fry on the beach. Just for them. The resurrected Jesus cares for them physically and spiritually, giving them the mission that will set the tone for the rest of their lives and ours too.

This mission of comfort, of attention to physical and spiritual needs is still what we do here today. That's what this table, this altar is about. It's Jesus' love for the disciples, it's Jesus' gift to all of us. Body, blood, gifts from heaven, sacrificed for us who deserve none of it. We didn't choose, we were chosen by Jesus. We are wounded, we are still healing. And in our shatteredness we keep coming back to this table.

We drag ourselves out of our broken hearts and set the table. We stand here and we lift the bread and the wine, we hold the Gospel above our heads, the cross, and the flames suspecting in our heart of hearts that we're actually fakes. We sit in the pew

miserable with the fights from last night, the coldness of our beds, the loss of our family members, the anger and hate that keeps exploding in the wrong rooms and the wrong times in this world. We are all fishermen and women at our core selves. Trying to make a living. Trying to catch a few things to eat and to sell and we have all let Jesus down but look - look - see how this table is still open to us. Still Jesus provides this nourishment because he knows we are hungry for God, for freedom, for love. This table is ours and always will be. It is a sign of Jesus' radical, transforming hospitality that changed and still changes the world. Jesus has prayed for us. God now treats us as if we were Jesus. Stop worrying if we are good enough, if we deserve this table, this offering of bread and wine. Irrelevant question. It is a gift, given to us in love. In this morning's passage, Jesus is leaving. But Jesus tells the disciples and us that he is sending the Advocate who will remain with us forever. On Thursday this last week, we celebrated the moment this church is named after. The moment of Jesus leaving so that new things can take place. We read about this in this morning's passage from the Book of Acts. After Jesus leaves, the disciples are left staring up at the now empty sky and then they go pray. Next week, we'll celebrate the arrival of the promised Holy Spirit.

But right now - we're in-between these two moments. We are changed forever from the old, and not yet fully immersed in the new. Like the disciples we gather here this morning in this room to pray. Women and men together, like the disciples in the first chapter of Acts. We pray. We sing. And when we are ready - no strike that. Who is ever ready for God? When the time comes, ready or not, we claim our faith in Jesus, in the one who sent Jesus and in the one who is still sending, and in a few moments we will boldly hold out our hands for Jesus. We open our mouths to take in God. We re-enact that crazy night so many centuries ago so we can remember, again, who has claimed us, who it is who names us, who it is that calls us into new life. We are broken but we are also loved and in that love, we are also free. "All mine are yours," Jesus prayed that night so long ago to God. "All mine are yours and all yours are mine."

And so it is. So we are. We are good enough for God, for Jesus who sets this table with our hands and our gifts, and for the Holy Spirit who holds us and guides us in love.

Lets us give thanks to God.