

GOD'S TABERNACLE

John 17:1-11

Thursday past, Ascension Day, is one of the great feast days in the Christian Year on a par with Christmas, Easter, Jesus' Baptism and Pentecost. But it's not a feast day that is on many people's calendar. And, although I had put the date in the calendar of events and strategically placed the Ascension Day worship service immediately prior to choir rehearsal, I neglected to publicize the service and subsequently only a tiny handful came. So I was thrilled when I saw a new face coming in the front door. "Welcome!" I greeted her effusively. "Are you here for the Ascension Day service? We're just about to get started." "Uuh, no, I'm actually just new in the neighborhood and was glad to see the door to the church open and wanted to come in. Do you have a tabernacle? I'd like to pray in front of the tabernacle if you have one." So I showed her the tabernacle, the *Aumbre* where we keep the reserve sacrament and the *presence lamp* that burns above it. She prayed in the chapel and the 6 of us gathered in the chancel for the Ascension Day service began our worship.

Later it dawned on me that our visitor pointed me to the true meaning of Ascension Day. We, the people and community of St. John's Church, are a tabernacle of our risen Lord Jesus Christ's living presence.

Ascensiontide – the 10 days between Ascension Day and Pentecost – can be a lonely and disheartening time. The great joy of greeting the risen Lord is behind us. So are the stories of his appearances on the road to Emmaus, in the upper room and to his disciples in Galilee. The exuberance of Pentecost with the fire of the Holy Spirit and the rush of a mighty wind, is still ahead of us. In *Ascensiontide* we are left with Jesus' absence. Jesus went up to heaven and the disciples were left on their own. And who does not experience from time to time the profound sense of God's absence, especially when we face times of illness and trial? *Ascensiontide* can be a disheartening time.

But Jesus' ascension needn't be a time of focusing on God's absence. Jesus' beautiful *high priestly prayer* in today's Gospel from John 17 reminds us that while Jesus is no longer physically present in 3D space and time, he still dwells in his disciples, his people, his Church.

I think of John 17:1-26 is the real *Lord's Prayer*; the one he prayed for us. What we call *the Lord's Prayer* that he taught us could more appropriately be named the *disciple's prayer*. John 17:1-26 is sometimes also called Jesus' *High Priestly Prayer*. For Jesus is the high priest who offers up both himself and his followers to God. He consecrates himself as the perfect offering to God and he consecrates his disciples to receive his gift and to represent him in the world.

Jesus prays at the last supper, immediately before his arrest, for his disciples. But more than that Jesus prays for us too. Today's gospel reading only goes through verse 11, but as Jesus continues to pray in verse 20 he says, "*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also*

on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word...” Jesus prays for the Church that came to be through the work of those first 12 disciples, Jesus prays for us.

Jesus first asks his Father to glorify his Son as he had finished his great work. That work was to give *eternal life* to all his followers. Jesus doesn’t speak of *eternal life* only as a future gift of immortality but as something real and experienced now, in this life, through knowing Jesus and through Jesus knowing the Father also. William Barclay in his *Daily Study Bible* writes, “*to possess eternal life, to enter into eternal life, is to experience here and now something of the splendor, and the majesty, and the joy, and the peace and the holiness, which are characteristic of the life of God.*” This was Jesus’ ministry on earth. “*He brought a distant and far-off, awesome God close up and personal so we too can call God by name.*” (*Lectionary Preaching Workbook, Series VII, Cycle A, pg. 120*)

Throughout the prayer Jesus speaks of *glory*. He prays that the time has come for the Father to glorify the Son. He prays that he may return to the glory that he had in his Father’s presence before the world began. What does Jesus mean by *glory*? In the Greek version of the O.T., the Septuagint, *the presence of the Lord* was often translated with the same word, *doxa*. The *light* or *splendor* of God’s presence is Jesus’ meaning. That *glory* is God’s own self, radiant, powerful beyond human ability to comprehend or see. That *glory* is revealed most truly in the life of Jesus God’s Son. That glory will be clearest in Jesus’ own death and resurrection. That glory, Jesus prays, will now shine brightly in the lives of his disciples and those who believe through their witness.

Jesus prays on his disciples’ behalf, not on behalf of the world. While Jesus is not praying here for the world remember it is for that very world that he came. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that all who believe in him may have eternal life.* (paraphrase of John 3:16) Jesus described himself as the *light* of the world. He prays here specifically for his followers who will be *in* the world but not *of* the world. He prays that they may be *one*. I think that Jesus is asking both that they (we) will be one with each other and also *one* – united – with God. Jesus expects and prays for his disciples to be unique, distinct, separate, from the world in order that they might be visible as Jesus’ followers. He wants us to be distinct so that his light might shine clearly in us. He prays for us in order that we might be his light to the world in order that the world (the cosmos) itself might be saved.

The Apostle Paul somewhat similarly prays for the Church in Ephesians 3:14-19. It is one of my favorite passages and puts in somewhat clearer language the same meaning as Jesus’ *high priestly prayer* of John 17.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpassed knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (NRSV)

It is good news, wonderful news, that Jesus prays for us. He prays for our protection and well being. He prays that his life will be strong in us, lived in us, revealed in us. He prays that we will know the joy of his eternal life and the unity he shares with his Father. He prays that his glory will shine in us, that we (his followers) may be the tabernacle of God's abiding presence.

As he prays that we may be *one* we should acknowledge and celebrate the diversity and the wider unity of Christ's Church. Christ's Church is celebrated in many languages and cultures throughout the world. His life is celebrated in these walls in English on Sunday mornings and in French and Creole Sunday evenings. His love is celebrated in bread and wine through proper Prayer Book liturgy on this side of Grove street and in exultant Gospel singing across the street at Faith Baptist Tabernacle. From Orthodox to mainline to Pentecostal, Christ's love is celebrated in many diverse and varied forms and in different denominations.

We should also celebrate those unique ways that we as a Christian community reveal God's glory, God's splendor in our life and worship. I believe God's glory is shown as we worship. We hear his glory in the deep tones of the organ and beautiful harmonies of our choir. We see his glory in pageantry and in the beauty of stained glass and soaring architecture. We taste his glory in bread and wine. We touch his glory in the laying on hands and prayers for healing, as we pass the Peace and share his life in fellowship and love. We live his glory as we serve and help others in his love. We grow in his glory as we study and learn, reading the scriptures and reflecting on his life and meaning.

And so this Ascensiontide we celebrate not Christ's absence but God's glory revealed in the ongoing life of God's Son, Jesus Christ. We – his followers today as his Church – are to be a living Tabernacle, the repository of his glory. Pray with Jesus that his light, his love, his unity, his splendor, his Glory may shine in us. Amen.