

The Seventh Sunday in Easter, Ascension Sunday, June 1, 2025
St. Michael's Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong

Gospel: John 17:20-26

Prayer: Almighty God, empower us to recognize and celebrate differences as your great gift to the human family. Enable us to become the architects of understanding, of respect and love; Through Jesus Christ, the ground of all unity we pray. Amen.

Today is called Ascension Sunday in our church calendar. It is **so** named because Jesus will soon ascend to heaven after being among his disciples for 40 days after his resurrection. Next Sunday, we will be celebrating Pentecost, the descending of the Holy Spirit onto his followers and the birth of the church.

When we examine the passages that come before today's assigned Gospel, we will notice that Jesus prays for his beloved children. After washing the disciple's feet, and before the hour of Jesus' arrest during Maundy Thursday, Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you. I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, Holy Father, protect them in your name, so that they may be one, as we are one."

Jesus makes this prayer before his ascension, reaffirming our identity as God's beloved children. In some ways, this prayer reminds me of words a parent would say to their children before leaving on a date night or a business trip when the baby sitter arrives. Jesus is doing the same here, he not only gives us reassurance of his love, but also some guidelines to follow. Jesus tells us that we are His children and He will always love us. Jesus assures us of eternal life, have **full** access to the truth, and because of Him, His joy is made complete in us. Lastly, because we are His children, we no longer belong to this world, just as he did not belong to the world, but our new identity compels us to be spreaders of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Then, following these passages, we are led to our Gospel scripture today, Jesus did something else— he prayed for the church. Jesus' prayer expanded to include not only his disciples who were present with him, but to those “who will believe in me through their word” — which is to say, the generations that follow, all the way down to us today. Jesus offered an intercessory prayer for divine help and guidance. And what is the help for?

In order for us to remain united in mind and theology, just as God and Jesus were united as one, we should live in unity with each other.

Living in unity is often easier said than done. Throughout the Bible, it is no surprise that humans can't seem to live in unity. They were people made up of different ethnic backgrounds and traditions. Jesus was aware of this so he reminds us to keep unity as a goal.

During the writing of John at the end of the first century, the unity of Jesus' followers was threatened by competing streams of apostolic Christians who aligned themselves with Peter and John as guarantors of the church's message and tradition. Many of the believers started to base their faith on human leaders and rules, and forgot about fulfilling the purpose of God's words. Adding to this were false teachers who threatened the teachings of the Gospel.

Therefore, both Paul and John spent much effort speaking about the importance of having unity to the church. For both of them, the unity of the church was not about uniformity and tradition, but about its main purpose—evangelism. This is a good reminder for us to place evangelism as a pivotal part of who we are. If we don't, it's easy for the church to become a container for traditions, rules and regulations. But the church is much more than that, it is a community that provides for peoples spiritual and physical needs. And always, it should be a haven and safety for the abused, hungry, lonely, invisible and marginalized.

Paul often had to correct the Corinthian churches for their divisions with one another. As the church grew, it began to develop rules and requirements that divided groups of people, made it impossible to follow, and therefore excluded people from becoming a believer. For example, the topic of circumcision was an issue that divided who was “included” and who was “not.” So, when Paul uses the word “united,” his definition meant the same idea as mending nets, or restoring an original unity. What is the original unity of the community of believers?

According to Paul's letter to Titus, the early church's mission **was** about carrying out the purpose of God's word. The early church's mission was about living in such a way that unbelievers would have nothing bad to say about them. Hence, because people saw how well Christians took care of each other by sharing their diverse resources, many non-Christians were converted.

This kind of care and sharing is behind the theology of Celtic Christianity. Before the 6th and 7th centuries, Irish monks established hundreds of monastic institutions in what we now know of as modern-day Scotland and Ireland and also on the continent of western Europe. Many of the monasteries were established purposely along routes that supported sojourners needs, providing food, shelter, work, and education. All sojourners knew they were welcomed. And while they were in the

monasteries, they knew that they had to share their talents and gifts with the monastery. Whether it be using their unique skills in carpentry, stone building, or music, they worked for their hospitality. Paul's letter to the Corinthian church reminds us of the importance of unity that comes from the diversity of gifts in the one body of Christ.

Being one in Christ is not the same as everyone thinking alike or everyone agreeing on the same things. Being one in Christ means many ideas coming together as one, working together, listening to each other, and respecting who God has created in each of us. It is about honoring and loving each others' different backgrounds and gifts. When God asks us to be one, often it requires learning about one another, so that we can all grow together.

This is no easy task. That is why next week, Jesus sends the Advocate, the Holy Spirit to help us next week when we celebrate Pentecost. Jesus says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." Jesus sends us out into the ends of the earth with the Holy Spirit along with our diversity of abilities and opinions. Whether our uniqueness is in our sexual identities, ethnicities, talents, and physical abilities—we **are** the church God intended us to be and use. And IN these differences, Jesus prays that we are of one in spirit.

What does Pentecost mean to us at St. Michael's Church? It means creatively re-imagining what church should be and could be— What does unity mean, and how do we encourage celebrating diversity. Which leads us to ask ourselves, what are we about— are we based on uniformity, tradition and history, or is it evangelically focused? Is our decisions and actions inclusive or excluding?

In the past and present issues of our monthly newsletter, The Guardian, which Melissa faithfully produces for us each month, I write articles about why we worship the way we do, and our identity as Episcopalians. I call it Episcopal Church 101. Some of the articles address basic questions many of us have, but are too shy to ask. Issues such as, Why do we bow when we read the name Jesus Christ, why do we ring the chimes during Holy Communion, why do we add water to the wine, where did the Book of Common Prayer come from, and how do we use The Daily Office? We do this our time of worship has meaning, not only rhetoric, instructions, and traditions. Instead, when our faith is understood, has meaning and relevance, it lives and thrives in our soul. It is when we understand the rich diversity and complexity in the faith do we grow and transform.

So, as the birth of our church is celebrated next week, let us together re-imagine a new church where we not only follow Jesus by listening and learning, but be a

community that is relevant to the world, always questioning what we do and why we do it. A re-imagined church witnesses God's expansive work at play. It is where PRISM ministry witnesses lives transformed in the jail. When a church is based on celebrating unity in our diversity, we will witness women, LGBTQia, and people of color become called to ordained ministry. When a church is outreaching, we will witness new ministries born, such as the one we will be participating in the Fall at Otis College of Art and Design. In a vibrant, united and refreshed church, let us join the Holy Spirit in what the church is all about—transformation of lives to the glory of God.

Amen