

Last Words John 17: 20-26; Luke 24: 44-53

As you may have guessed, it was difficult to choose the Scripture for this morning- and then ended up with an unusual situation of Gospel lessons from two different Gospels. This past Thursday, May 26, is listed on Church calendars as Ascension of the Lord, when Jesus returned to heaven-notably a significant event in Christ's life. And then today, Sunday, May 29, we find ourselves at an intersection of the seventh and final Sunday of those weeks we refer to as "Sundays of Easter" AND the Sunday just prior to our recognizing and celebrating the Day of Pentecost- often noted as the birthday of The Church. It seemed difficult and unfortunate to make a choice- Ascension of the Lord OR the final Sunday of Easter- thus, two Gospel readings. Just an aside- After next week, we will move ahead on the Church calendar to twenty-three "Sundays after Pentecost" ending in November with Christ the King Sunday and the beginning of Advent. Watch the change in parameters as we move through these Seasons of the Church.

Back to Scripture choices- to only complicate matters, the Lectionary also suggests a reading- last words- from the very last verses of Revelation- a portion of which will be used as the Benediction. A lot of reading and research along with seeking God's guidance hopefully can give a clarity and a message to these Gospel readings- - - Jesus final prayer for his disciples before going to Jerusalem and the cross- found in John 17; -as well as the very last verses of Luke 24- Jesus last words before his Ascension into heaven.

A bit of background- John 13 through John 16 begins a recording of Jesus' attempts to teach and prepare his disciples for the days ahead prior to his leaving them. Then the entire Chapter 17 contains a prayer of Jesus to his Father followed by Chapter 18 and the account of Jesus' journey to the cross. Jesus, in the prayer found in Chapter 17, begins first a prayer on his own behalf, then on behalf of his disciples who were with him and then for those believers who would follow in the future. The first five verses of John 17 is a personal plea that he- Jesus- might glorify the Father in the ultimate sacrifice on the cross which he knew lay before him. Next, in verses 9-19, he prayed for his disciples that they might be consecrated to God's truth in order to serve Christ as he sends them into the world. In the final verses 20-26, Jesus offers a prayer for those who will believe in him in the future. MAKE NOTE- All believers who read verses 20-26 should be aware the Lord is praying for them! That includes us- what a thought!

Jesus' prayer not only reflects his certainty about God but also affirms his confidence in the disciples. Even knowing the disciples' fears, struggles and weaknesses, Jesus did not lose trust in them. He was convinced God would use them- AND us- as instruments to spread the good news throughout the world.

Jesus also prayed for the unity of the future church. He prayed that future growth would not negatively impact its unity. He prayed that future disciples in the church would be united as he

and God, the Father, were united: verse 21- “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you.” Jesus’ unity with the Father is based on a unique personal communion of the Son with the Father.

The unity in Jesus’ prayer for future generations in the church extends beyond organizational uniformity. If Christians, independent of denomination, loved one another as Jesus loved the Father and the Father loved Jesus, this same expression of love should be evident in the life and work of “the church” as much as humanly possible. The motivating power of God’s love which guided the ministry of Jesus should then be the dominating expression of the church’s mission. We who claim to be “the church” must guard against times of disunity in “the church” which often may prove to be examples to the world that the “the church” has lost sight of its mission to share God’s love as it claims to experience it in Christ.

We often pray the petitions in what we call The Lord’s Prayer, but Jesus’ farewell, final words in John’s Gospel is the prayer in which we are most deeply prayed FOR- we are the recipients of the prayer. This prayer of Jesus truly unifies all humankind and binds us- and the world- intimately to the God in whose heart we dwell.

Our second Gospel reading- Luke 24: 44-53; First of all- the event of Christ’s Ascension into heaven is mentioned only briefly in the Gospels- first in the last two verses of the Gospel of Mark and then at the very end of the Gospel of Luke- verses 50 and 51. Additionally, in the first eleven verses of the Book of Acts, we find the writer, also Luke, repeating some of the things he included at the end of Luke 24.

In Luke, Christ’s Ascension is recorded after Jesus’ resurrection when he met the two on the road to Emmaus and went with them to the place where the disciples were gathered. Jesus reveals himself to them proving it by showing them his hands and his feet as well as eating with them. We then find Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures” and reminded them they were witnesses to his suffering, death and resurrection. He instructed them to stay in the city until they had received power from on high- the power God would send. Then he took them out as far as Bethany, blessed them and was carried up to heaven. Their response was to worship him and return to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God. Their response is significant- they believed without question what they had seen and heard, they worshiped continually while they waited for what Jesus promised would be sent to them. That promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost- which will be addressed next Sunday.

The primary message from Jesus for the disciples and for us who have followed them is found as Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” The scriptures- “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance

and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” The disciple’s future task, once they received the promised empowerment, was to proclaim to ALL NATIONS that repentance and forgiveness of sins was promised in Christ’s name. As we celebrate Pentecost next week, we will likely be reminded of Jesus’ disciples being empowered to move out beyond Jerusalem into other regions. That empowerment and final word has held true down through the generations since and is now the responsibility for all of Christ’s disciples here and now wherever we or they may be.

In Jesus ascension, we need to take care that we don’t get caught up in the HOW of Jesus being carried into heaven. God does not desire to prove that the law of gravity is being defied nor is the location of heaven in the sky- or in outer space- being identified. God is not trying to hide something with the clouds that surrounded our Lord at the Ascension; rather, God desires to clarify and to verify what happened to Jesus after his resurrection. Our Lord was neither time-bound nor space-bound by his resurrection body. Rather, he was released to reign as sovereign king of all creation. His presence and his power are unlimited. This profound revelation is communicated through the ascension imagery of a movement UPWARD. Christ was moving upward to a higher level of life- a life that was higher than the tangible, material, localized and limited human life he shared with others while on earth.

“Last Words” from the Gospels this morning-

*Gospel of John Chapter 17- Jesus prayed for and continues to pray for his disciples. If we confess Christ as our Lord we are empowered by those prayers to continue to be faithful disciples in this often chaotic world of ours. No matter the name we post on our church doors and in our bulletins- we, as “the church” are obligated to live lives working to continue and expand the unity for which Christ prayed. We are the face of Christ to the world around us. May that face be Christ-like in every way.

*Gospel of Luke Chapter 24- Jesus gave the disciples instructions to be the messengers of “repentance and the promise of forgiveness” beginning in Jerusalem and to be proclaimed to all nations. The disciples lived, proclaimed Christ- sometimes died for Christ- but with one goal: that all nations might know the peace and joy available through Christ’s ministry, death and resurrection. If we confess Christ as our Lord, we bear the obligation to live lives showing and sharing the glorious news of salvation.

Last words from Jesus- living lives in Christ-like unity and sharing the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ to all nations. Amen

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