

What Next?

Our gospel reading from John is from what is called Jesus' farewell address to his disciples. This portion is known as Jesus' high priestly prayer. Although we are told often that Jesus goes aside to pray, we are rarely given the words or even the subject of his prayers. This text might be called the *Other* Lord's Prayer in contrast to the one used during worship. That prayer was given as a model for them for how they were to pray. This prayer was his prayer FOR them, an intercessory prayer. I read a few verses beyond those listed because those verses move the text from that occasion and those disciples into our lives, the lives of all future disciples: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." John's gospel is the most theologically dense of the narratives about Jesus' life and ministry. And sometimes, quite frankly, it is metaphysical and confusing. All this talk about you and me, they and the world, mine and yours and all the rest in one convoluted sentence—"I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you." The context is that Jesus, although he knows as John frames it, his hour is come—he is actually still with the disciples and is praying this prayer in their presence. The arrest, trial and crucifixion are near, but not yet. Jesus is preparing them for what is to come; for their role in the world when he is no longer present with them as Jesus of Nazareth. In our world and time when the world's view seems to be less and less in alignment with the teachings of the One we follow, looking at the prayer of Jesus for those whom he had called and who had answered that call might be helpful for our understanding of our role as his disciples. The first thing which stands out in this prayer is more what Jesus did NOT ask. Jesus does not ask that it be easy. He knows it won't be. The world they faced is very like this world we live in. This world is captive to a spirit alien to God's spirit. This world is animated by a sense of scarcity instead of abundance, fear instead of courage, and selfishness instead of sacrificial love. Jesus—the one who came to bring abundant life, does not run away in the face of danger. As the good shepherd he lays down his life for the sheep—he offers an alternative spirit and reality to that of the world. He embodies God's alternative reality for living. The world represents the power and spirit that is hostile to God's good intention to love and redeem all. So the world hates Jesus and will also hate those who follow him. So Jesus doesn't pray that it will be easy, but rather that God will support the disciples amid their challenges—and that they will be one in fellowship with each other and with Jesus and the Father through the Holy Spirit. In the additional verses we see that Jesus—even then—was praying for us—not that it would be easy, but that we would find God's support and encouragement and that we may be one in fellowship with each other and with God. These two things actually go together. As we gather to hear God's Word and to remind each other of God's promises, we are not only drawn together in deeper fellowship but we also find the strength and courage to face the challenges that come from living in the world and bearing witness to the alien and alternative gospel of grace, abundance, courage, and love that is ours in and through Jesus Christ. It is sometimes difficult in this age of digital technology and

internet communications to find glimpses of that alternative reality that is God's kingdom here on earth. I imagine when Jesus took those disciples outside the city and then ascended into heaven, when the realization hit that they were on their own, they were probably dismayed at being left in the care of one another. He ascends promising they will not be left alone but will receive the Holy Spirit in a few days. That is also the promise that we have received. We are not left alone—we have God's presence among us through the Holy Spirit. We have also been left to love one another as Christ first loved us, to relate to one another as Christ taught us. We are on a faith journey together. Ram Dass, who was a prominent American spiritual guide, described the faith journey this way, that when all is said and done, "we're all just walking each other home." When we are called to abide in Christ's love; love that is not centered on self and what we gain from the other in a relationship. Instead it is based on the desire for good for the other—the one loved. If we take that idea of "Just walking each other home" we see it expresses this desire for that good for the other. Not one of us has it all figured out, not one of us knows the direct perfect short road to home. Not one of us hasn't fallen off the path to home or been confused and unsure about the way. But, we are those people Jesus prays for—present tense—because Jesus is still praying for—those people he has left together to walk each other home with the guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit. We are people who can gently walk alongside one another, who know the doubts, who know the insecurities, the uncertainties which occur as we make our journey. We have been gathered into community so we can walk each other home, to provide support for each other as we also continue as disciples who are sent. Rev. Carson Brisson puts it this way: "Those most home seek those least home." Those first few weeks after the resurrection when the risen Christ was still among them, although the disciples remained together, they did not make any plans for the future or their mission. Just before he ascended, Jesus told them they would need to wait a few more days before the Holy Spirit would come to them. They go back to Jerusalem to await the arrival of the Spirit which would then enable them to be the witnesses to what they knew about God's grace and mercy revealed to them through their knowledge of Christ. One of the last questions they had asked Jesus before the Ascension was about the nearness of the expected final judgment. They still wanted to know when Israel would be restored to the glory of David's United Kingdom. They were still focused on their expectations. Jesus' response was that time was not theirs to know--go back and wait. So they return to Jerusalem. While they are waiting we are told they continue their practice of continuously praying in the Temple together. But something is now different--things have not turned out as they expected when they began following Jesus; things have not even turned out as they thought they would after his death when they discovered that death was not the ending to Jesus' mission and purpose; things have not turned out as their hopes then have led them to expect the power God has shown to immediately lead to Israel's restoration and the end of Roman occupation. All of these disappointments to their hopes and expectations must have led to some frustrations. They are being asked--really forced to wait--to wait for the promised Holy Spirit, but then what? How are they to proceed? At first they seem to have no idea. In the passage from Acts we see how they begin to find those answers as they turn toward the future even before the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Without Jesus, they seem to be without a leader or spokesman.

They were hand picked for the mission—a symbolic twelve which was no longer whole due to the betrayal by Judas. As they continue to wait and pray, they must have had some discussions about the recent past and the looming future when they were to begin their task. Those discussion and interchanges of ideas are not given to us. Our text begins when they start forming their approach to the future. "In those days Peter stood up among the believers." Peter becomes the spokesman within the group—and as we will see next week—for the group at Pentecost. The first speech he makes after the Ascension is to address what is really an institutional question. In many ways this marks the origin of the church as an institution. When he speaks he addresses that glaring hole in the inner circle left by Judas' betrayal. There are several differing accounts of what happened to Judas after the betrayal—including the one in the verses which our lectionary passage omitted from today's reading. But for the community of disciples left behind there was a wound within the group which needed healing, a need to be made whole again which is here addressed by Peter. That twelve had been chosen by Jesus to be not just followers, but Apostles—those sent-- was symbolic for the restoration of Israel—to the reconciliation of the twelve tribes. Peter says, "Friends, the scriptures had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." This frames Judas' role of betrayal as the means by which God's purpose was achieved; it was a necessary component of God's plan, thus lessening the sense of betrayal to the group—to themselves by one of their own. But Jesus' design was for there to be twelve. In order to restore the unity of the group a replacement for Judas must be found. This replacement must be with someone who fits a certain description—someone who has been with them "during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken from us." This description of the one to replace Judas is important because it shows that while they are waiting they are also looking forward, not back to the past but are looking forward to how they will accomplish this mission they have been given. Peter's criteria are it must be someone who has been with them because "one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." The group must be made whole by someone who can give personal testimony to what has happened—to the teachings—to the signs of Christ's identity they have seen up to and including the risen Lord. The text goes on two say that two such individuals were chosen as possibilities—Justus and Matthias. No other qualifications or character references are given—just that they have followed Jesus from the beginning until the ascension. Unlike church decisions today, the choice is not put to a vote, but after more prayer where they ask the Lord to make the choice they cast lots. "Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship." Matthias is chosen by the Apostles, but is never mentioned again in the book of Acts. Whatever we think of the method they chose, it was understood in their times to reflect, not chance as we might think, but the will of God. What is important from these two texts is how we are shown about how we are to live into our role as disciples—we are to seek God's guidance and support—we are to love and support one another as we witness to what we know of Christ because we are not left alone on this journey. Thanks be to God.

