**Easter 7, Year A**

June 1, 2014

It is very easy to get disheartened. It seems that the world just gets more and more violent: there is the ongoing civil war in Syria, displacing hundreds of thousands; the ongoing crisis in Sudan, where not only is there mass starvation, but young pregnant mothers are being sentenced to death for not renouncing their Christian faith; the kidnapping of all those schoolgirls in Nigeria by a group too violent even for Al Queda; the list could go on and on. Then there are the natural disasters: the landslide in Washington, the mudslide here in Colorado, tornadoes, floods, hurricanes. On a *smaller* scale, but much closer to home, we experience little deaths in our own lives. A friend or loved one dies, and our world seems to become a bit smaller. Divorce devastates a family, illness debilitates, financial problems loom over us. Relationships are damaged by words which wound: gossip, or criticism, or thoughtlessness.

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We are all vulnerable to despair, for our own resources inevitably fail us in confronting the powers of the world, our own brokenness, and the manifold crises of life. We seem powerless to change -- either to change the violence of our world, the death all around, or even to change our own hurtful, unloving, destructive behaviors.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp, tells of an incident which he experienced there:

*The SS* **hung** *two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. “Where is God? Where is he?” a man behind me asked… I heard the man cry again, “Where is God now?” and I heard a voice within me answer, “Here he is—he is hanging on the gallows.” (quoted in* Lectionary Homiletics*, vol. 10, #6, p.17)*

In our Gospel today, we have the last words of Jesus before he is arrested and sent to the gallows. It is Maundy Thursday, after the Last Supper; Judas has already gone to betray him, and Jesus has just given extended instructions to his remaining disciples. But “Jesus’ ***final*** words before his ‘hour’ are ***not*** last-minute instructions to the community about what it should do in Jesus’ absence; instead, his words [hand] the future of the community over to God.” (Gail O’Day, Abingdon: “John”, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 9, p.797; italics mine) The last minutes before his arrest Jesus spends in prayer: an intimate prayer which his disciples – *and* we who read John’s Gospel – are allowed to eavesdrop upon.

“Father,” Jesus begins, “the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.” In the supreme irony of a Gospel which revels in irony, Jesus’ glorification will begin on the gallows. And yet it truly ***is*** glorification, in the sense that Jesus’ willing death on the cross manifests supremely the identity of a God who is love.

We have said that we are powerless in the face of the violence and death all around. And yet here is Jesus, facing evil and violence and death, and his final prayer is a prayer of utmost confidence and hope. How is it that Jesus can look squarely into the face of betrayal and violence and still remain centered and hopeful? What does he know that we don’t?

It would be too easy for us to say, “He is God’s son; he is all-powerful; he knows he will be resurrected, so of course he can afford to be calm and confident in the face of death.” But to say that is to deny the very reason that Jesus was born and lived among us: to become **fully** one of us. And in becoming *fully* human, *fully* one of us, he was most definitely subject to all the discouragements that we are. That Jesus knows he will rise from the dead is open to debate, but at best I think it is irrelevant to this prayer of Jesus. His confidence derives ***not*** from knowing the future, but rather from **trusting,** completely, his Father. This prayer has ***nothing*** to do with Jesus’ knowing that he will be raised from the dead, and ***everything*** to do with the utter and absolute trust and love which he has for God. No, if we are to learn anything from our Gospel lesson this morning, it is about the most intimate relationship between Jesus and God, and – us.

Boston University professor Merle Jordan believes that the key question of our lives is “Whose are you?... Who defines you in the heart and core of your very being? Whose voice do you believe communicates eternal truth to you – the inner whisper of the ***divine*** voice offering you love, forgiveness and eternal life, the clamoring and distracting noises of the world offering deceptive pleasures, or the critical internal and external voices which criticize and reject you? Most people,” professor Jordan writes, “move back and forth among the voices and the authorities that compete for their allegiance, attention and loyalty.” (*LH*, p. 18) Jesus, however, does not. His confidence is in knowing that he belongs to God the Heavenly Father, the source of life and love, forgiveness and resurrection, and this God holds him forever in his love and care.

***That*** is what Jesus knows that we – most of the time – do not. Not foreknowledge of the future, but confidence that we belong to God. Oh, we know it in our *heads*, we agree with the theological statement that “we belong to God”; but the message has not been transmitted out of our heads to our heart, our gut, our soul, our consciousness. Our *whole being* needs to know that it is our Heavenly Father who chose us, calls us, loves us, redeems and heals us, and commissions us to be His presence in His world. We are defined by Who we belong to.

Howard Thurman, a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., often recounted a story of hope for African-American people in their seemingly hopeless struggle for equality. When Dr. Thurman was a little boy, his grandmother told him about her experiences as a child on a slave plantation. In the midst of all of the oppression, degradation and pain of that ignominious period in American history, his grandmother recounted the moments of worship for the slaves when a black minister was allowed to conduct services. On each occasion when he preached, he would always look his enslaved brothers and sisters in the eye and say to them, “You are **not** slaves, you are **not** niggers, you are the beloved children of God.” (*Ibid*., p.18)

*That* is what Jesus knows to the very core of his being: he is the beloved child of God. Nothing will take that reality away – not betrayal by one of his closest friends, not abandonment by all his disciples, not staring into the very face of violence and evil. What is behind Jesus’ prayer is not ***foreknowledge*** of the future, but rather utmost *confidence*and*trust* that God **holds** his future in divine and loving hands. In this prayer, Jesus entrusts to the Heavenly Father not only his **own** life, but the lives of all whom he loves.

Throughout Chapters 14, 15, and 16, Jesus has been giving his farewell instructions to his disciples. Then suddenly in our Gospel this morning, he turns away from his disciples, and looks up to heaven. No longer is he speaking to the disciples; his focus and attention are on God as he enters into this prayer. It is as if Jesus has suddenly enclosed himself in a bubble which separates himself from the disciples to whom he has just been speaking. Inside this bubble, Jesus is alone with God in the most intimate prayer. But the amazing thing is that the disciples—and all of us who read John’s Gospel--can see and hear all that goes on in this bubble. We hear and feel the intimacy and love radiating from Jesus’ prayer, radiating from this bubble. In this farewell prayer of Jesus we are allowed to see into this most intimate relationship as clearly as anyone possibly can. And not ***only*** are we allowed to ***see*** into this most intimate relationship, we are actually ***drawn*** into and ***included*** in this relationship between Jesus and the Father. Suddenly, **we** are inside the bubble *with* Jesus and God! “All mine are yours,” Jesus prays to the Father, “and yours are mine… Holy Father, protect them… that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” In this prayer, Jesus opens up ***his*** most intimate relationship with the Father – a relationship so close that they are one – to include the community of faith *within* that relationship and as **part** of that unity. The bubble of intimacy miraculously expands to include all of us who are listening and are willing to be included.

And so in answer to Professor Jordan’s question, “Whose are you?” we can, with all our being, proclaim, “We are God’s children, one with Christ and the Father, confident that whatever the future may bring, be it joy or suffering, life or death, it is in the loving hands of God.” **That** is the amazing message of this Gospel lesson. At the very moment of his arrest and betrayal, on the very eve of his crucifixion, Jesus places himself, *and all of us*, into the very womb of God’s love and care, confident that no matter **what** the future brings—and for him it will bring betrayal, torture, and death—it will not fall outside the arms of God’s control and care.

It is indeed easy to get disheartened and discouraged. There is so much that is not right in our world, so much brokenness, so much heartlessness, so much lack of love. And we ourselves are complicit! And yet – and yet, there is reason for hope and confidence, because we have been included in the bubble, drawn into the life of the Holy Trinity. In the verse immediately *preceding* our passage, immediately before Jesus turns away from talking to his disciples and looks up to heaven, Jesus says to his friends, “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have overcome the world!"

In the end, “powerless love will overcome loveless power”. Jesus has prayed for it, God has promised it, we have been included in it; and it will be so. No need to be disheartened! No need to be complicit in loveless words or actions. Our risen Lord has overcome the world! And we are one with him in God.

AMEN