



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

THE SEVENTH
SUNDAY OF
EASTER
MAY 12, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Do we ever imagine Jesus praying for us? Forget the theological quandary of God praying to God. Our brains would explode. But think about it. Jesus prayed for his disciples. And aren't we called to be his disciples? Therefore, according to the rules of logic, Jesus prays for us.

Here is another way to think about it. In the setting of the reading from the Gospel according to John this morning, Jesus knows he will be leaving. He will be crucified. He will be raised from the dead. He will remain on earth for a while, and he will be lifted up and return to heaven. An event we celebrated last Thursday, on the Ascension.

Now we are blessed with three grandchildren, but cursed that one is in Maryland, and two are in Spain. In my childhood, we were never more than a day's drive from all four of my grandparents, who essentially lived across the street from each other in uptown New Orleans. We would see them three, four, five times a year. They were part of the fabric of my life. So the distant grandchild thing is disappointing. We are deprived of the overnights and weekends and impromptu moments of "can you, please, watch the kids for us tonight while we have some fun." Of course, we can. Bring 'em over and we will spoil them to sleep.

So let's think of Jesus leaving his disciples, leaving us, with his Father. His prayer is his way of leaving his instructions as he entrusts us to the father's care. Just as any parent would leave an array of detailed instructions to the grandparents to whom they are entrusting their children for an evening out or few days of respite. As if we grandparents knew nothing about caring for children. Can we hear the wump, wump, wump of the helicopter blades?

So what are Jesus' "instructions" to his Father? Take care of them. Protect them. Sanctify them. The world I am leaving them in is an unholy mess. Keep them safe and untarnished.

Now Jesus never suggests that the Father remove his disciples from the world. And for John, the world is no mere geographic or planetary location.

The world is “the world insofar as it has rebelled against God, has chosen darkness rather than light, and has organized itself to oppose the creator.”¹

Jesus’ disciples are not called to withdraw from the world. We are to be equipped to confront it and conquer it. But we must appreciate, too, that from the perspective of this dark world, we are what theologian Stanley Hauerwas calls in his book of the same name, “resident aliens.”² No wonder we need protection. No wonder we need divine care. No wonder we need to be sanctified.

What does that mean? Does it mean to be holy? Yes, but in a particular sense that derives from the meaning of the Greek word John uses for sanctify. It has nothing to do with excessively pious religiosity and all our little personal acts of piety. The more basic meaning is “different “or “separate.” Jesus prays that we will understand that we are different from the world. And we must stay separate from the world. Not in a physical sense, but in our true identity, nature, and orientation or perspective. We are on the outside looking in. We are the people, the disciples, who will look at what some celebrities wore to the Met Gala last week and say wait a minute.

So much in the world can give us pause. We are rocked by an onslaught of rampant and ubiquitous cultural and religious change not seen since the Great Reformation of the 16th century. It started in the 60s (thank you, boomers – you’re welcome) and likely will not end in our lifetimes. As historian Doris Kearns Goodwin observed in her recently published tome on the sixties *An Unfinished Love Story*, “[A]n immense tailwind of social and cultural change was already beginning to drive the generation coming of age at the dawn of the Sixties.”³ That wind still blows. And no nation or culture is excluded. No religion or denomination is exempt.

Meanwhile, we can see the strains in our nation, culture, and churches. We cling to the past like it is the only high ground in raging flood waters. Or we blindly leap into the current of change without considering where it might take us. Faith and trust in God give way to greed, fear, and the lust for power. Violence is the preferred means of resolving conflict, whether on the battlefields of war, the streets of our communities, the campuses of our universities, the steps and chambers of our capital. Even our bedrooms and back yards.

¹ N.T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 2* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p.95.

² Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014).

³ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *An Unfinished Love Story* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2024) p. 37.

Politicians seek the blessing of religion. Religion seeks the power of the state. And both are corrupted. The line between righteousness and self-righteousness fades, as the tenets of Scripture are lifted from its foundation of love and used to judge rather than love our neighbors. Young people fall away, considering institutional religion hypocritical, judgmental, anti-scientific, and exclusive. The pews grow emptier.

We no longer just disagree. We disagree disagreeably. We demonize those with whom we disagree and assume that any and all of their views are wrongheaded without taking a moment to try to understand them. As observed by American conservative political and cultural commentator David Brooks:

American society, at every economic level, is still plagued by enmity, distrust, isolation, willful misunderstanding, ungraciousness and just plain meanness.⁴

Relationships are rent. Communities disintegrate. This is the world we live. These are times we live in. And we all know it. Good thing Jesus is praying for us. Good thing Jesus promised the gates of hell never would prevail against the Church.⁵

And here we are. Still gathering, praying, remembering who and whose we are. Consider Pope Francis' conversation with a transgender sex worker at his weekly audience several years ago. The woman in a pink blouse, jeans, and white sandals blurted out to the Pope in Italian:

“I’m a transsexual from Paraguay,” He smiled and replied, “You are also a child of God.” She asked for his blessing, and he touched both her shoulders. “God bless you,” the pope said. “You, too,” [she] responded. When Francis laughed, she asked him

⁴ David Brooks, “How to Create a Society that Prizes Decency,” *The New York Times* (May 9, 2024), https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/09/opinion/polarization-biden-america.html?campaign_id=39&emc=edit_ty_20240510&instance_id=122948&nl=opinion-today®i_id=64556392&segment_id=166235&te=1&user_id=030839ce118967eddb76cc6bede50b75 (accessed May 9, 2024).

why. “We should speak Spanish, we’re South American,” he said, linking their identities.⁶

Jesus might pray for us that we see the child of God that is every person we encounter.

Jesus might pray that we realize our affinities with other human beings, even Red Sox fans.

Jesus might pray that we lead with open ears and open hearts rather than closed minds.

Jesus might pray that we seek to understand, rather than instinctively insist on misunderstanding our neighbor, for the convenience of our ideologies and personal piques.

Jesus might pray that we never hesitate to ask for and offer forgiveness.

Jesus might pray that if we fail to establish God’s kingdom on earth today, we might just create a culture, where it is easier to be decent to one another.⁷

Jesus might pray that we never become “of the world” that we live in, that we are, indeed, sanctified.

And then, as Jesus, says, his joy will be complete in us.

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⁶ “How Pope Francis opened the Vatican to trans sex workers,” *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/podcasts/post-reports/how-pope-francis-opened-the-vatican-to-trans-sex-workers/> (accessed May 7, 2024).

⁷ Brooks, *supra*.