

How Shall We Love

INTRODUCTION

We continue our journey from the Resurrection light into the world in which we live. For some, the further we get, the more the glory of that day seems to fade. Yet we are still Easter people, walking in the hope and the promise of eternity. Such knowledge can't be hidden away, can't be a secret that we keep from the world around us. Rather, we are called to live as transformed people, as signs of Resurrection and of life.

The previous Easter season series asked us "How shall we live?" as we made our way from the empty tomb. Now we take another step and ask a deeper question: "How shall we love?" That has always been our call as followers of Christ, to lead with love. But we don't always know how to do that. Or we are intimidated by the scale of the problems that are before us. Or we recognize that the world we live in today isn't as receptive to loving acts as it once was, if it ever really was. So, we draw back; we close our doors; we stick with our own rather than reaching out to a hurtful and hurting world.

How shall we love? What does love look like? What does love include? We need to spend some time together, before God, contemplating the invitation to a life that leads with love. Of course, we need to do more than just contemplate; we need to love. We step out; we reach out; we invite and encourage; we lift up and help heal. And sometimes we get it wrong, and sometimes it isn't received in the spirit intended. But we keep at it. We keep loving. Because that's what it means to be Easter people. We are the people who ask, "How shall we love?"

Fifth Sunday of Easter – We Bear Fruit

April 28, 2024

[John 15:1-8](#)

Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

As we follow the Gospel of John through Eastertide, we encounter a strange and fitting marriage of the glorious and the ordinary. Perhaps more accurately, we discover how to give glory through the ordinary. Throughout the three weeks of this series, the theme of giving glory or glorifying God arises again and again, which raises important questions for worship planners and leaders: "How do we give God glory? Do we reduce glorifying God to praise and thanksgiving, or is there something more to this glorifying business? Something that encompasses the whole gamut of our relationship with God? Something less shiny and yet more glorious?"

John 15 certainly invites us to reassess our ideas of what it means to glorify God by offering a simple agricultural metaphor—"I am the vine, you are the branches" (verse 5). Take a moment to look closely at a grapevine—not the grapes, not the dreamy pictures of rows upon rows of vines in a vineyard at sunset. Look closely at the vine and the branches holding the grapes. They are woody and rough, hearty enough not only to produce fruit but also to hold the grapes off the ground so they can ripen to

maturity, especially when tended and pruned well. Yes, those branches produce delicious and nutritious fruit, but we are not called to *be* the fruit. We are called to give glory to the Vine by being branches that bear fruit, which raises so many possibilities for worship planners and leaders.

Consider first how you might depict the vine, branches, and fruit in worship. Perhaps you choose a digital image as a background for your slides that emphasizes not just the grapes but the vine and the branches that hold up the grapes. Maybe you want to bring vines, branches, and fruit (real or artificial) onto the chancel or altar. Don't feel limited to just grapevines! What crops or plants are local to your area that might help you depict this call to hearty discipleship? If Jesus were teaching in your area today instead of ancient Palestine, what agricultural metaphor might he have chosen instead of grapevines and grapes?

We also don't want to forget that we glorify God through the mundane and messy. Consider how you might emphasize this beautiful mix of glory and the ordinary. Perhaps you want to expand the offering as a presentation of our financial gifts, yes, but also a presentation of our vocations, careers, skills, and talents as an offering to God. Take time to lift up and bless the work we do with our hands—whether paid or volunteer, skilled or unskilled—as expressions of love, as fruit we bear as branches connected to the Vine.

Jesus reminds us that the Vine also prunes every branch so that it may bear fruit. How might you help your congregation encounter God's holy gardening shears in worship? Creating space for confession and pardon certainly helps us uncover the ways that God is pointing us away from sin and toward all that is life-giving. Or you might consider incorporating a time of quiet meditation and prayer accompanied by simple instrumental music or a sung chorus from Taizé, inviting the gathered body to hold space with one another to listen for God's gentle direction and pruning. However you choose to engage this text in worship, it is important to enliven and make real the metaphor Jesus uses while also avoiding any tendency to focus on what it means *not* to bear fruit. In other words, invite the congregation to experience the fullness of what it means to bear the fruit of love as branches connected to the Vine, so they know what it feels like, looks like—even tastes like!—to bear the fruit of kin-dom of God as individuals and as a community.

PREACHING NOTES

Rocks. Not just rocks, but nine-tenths of a ton of rocks! Those are some serious rocks. It was a gift for my wife. Of course, she went and bought them herself. She didn't trust us to get the right kind, and I don't blame her. Rocks are rocks as far as I can tell. So, she went to Fort Wayne Rocks and bought just shy of a ton of rocks that now sit in our driveway. Waiting.

Now, when I say rocks, just so there is no confusion, I don't mean precious stones. At least precious as in valuable, as in gemstones, as in the kind you would wear. This is limestone. Rocks. Not even the pretty Indiana limestone that they use to face buildings all over the country. No, this is the stuff they break up to make back roads that no one really wants to drive on. They aren't pretty, in a conventional kind of way. Just a pile of rocks. Waiting.

It is always difficult to buy presents for my wife. Whether Christmas, birthday, or Mother's Day - she just doesn't like normal kinds of gifts. I see the retailers pulling out the stops trying to get us to save the

whole world's economy this Mother's Day by encouraging us to buy almost anything. Jewelry for Mother's Day, flowers, technology, heck, buy mom a new car, some of them plead. But not a single one has mentioned rocks. Just sayin'.

Still, somewhere along the line, I learned that giving to someone you love is not about giving what you want to give, but giving what they want to receive. I know; it seems simple now, but it took a long time for me to get there. It took a lot of gifts that were received with grace and gratitude but were not terribly useful or practical or even used after the holiday had passed. It took a lot of me trying to make her into my image of her, trying to think what I would like if I were her, trying to imagine she was something other than what she was. Instead, what I should have been doing was asking what would make her happy, what would please her in who she was.

What does all of that have to do with the vine in our text for this week? And about bearing fruit? Well, I'm not exactly sure, but it seemed appropriate, in a way. That maybe there was something here about how we bear fruit for one another, about how we love one another. That's the theme for the series, anyway. Let's see if we can find a link.

The vine had been used by earlier rabbis and prophets, but to represent Israel. "Israel is a luxurious vine," claims Hosea, "that yields its fruit" (*Hosea 10:1*). Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel all use the image of the vine to describe the people of God in Israel. Sometimes, as in Jeremiah, the reference is to a vine that was planted to produce good fruit and now has gone wild, producing fruit unfit for nourishment. The vine has a long tradition in the mindset of the people of God.

But Jesus takes it and turns it a little bit from the usual understanding. Instead of Israel as the vine, instead of the people of God planted and tended by God, Jesus says, "I am the vine." More than that, he says he is the vine, and we are the branches. We can view this as a hierarchical statement if we want to, but it makes more sense to see it as a description of role and function. Jesus is the source of sustenance; Jesus is the connection to the root system that keeps us stable and fed and able to tend to the business of the branch, which is producing fruit.

Beyond that simple description, there is advice aplenty in these eight verses. Stay connected, that's number one here. Stay connected to the vine, to the source. Without that, there will be no fruit. There is also a warning - watch out for pruning. Not because of being cut off so much, as being left out. We always read this as judgment, and it is. But the real power of the image is that what is pruned misses the vitality of connection; you miss the verdant life offered; you miss out on the sustenance and strengthening and the glory of growth and life and joy. And you miss the opportunity to produce fruit.

Again, we read this as a responsibility, and it is. We are to produce fruit, that is clear from these verses. It is our job; it is our responsibility, our reason for being. But it is also our fulfillment and our joy; it is our opportunity and hope. It is the way we have of responding to the one we love.

Gift-giving, whatever the occasion, is a chance to express love. To return love. To claim love. It is our opportunity to do something, not for ourselves, but for one who loves us. And while our inclination is to try and find something that we like, something that says something about us for the one that we love, maturity invites us to find something that brings joy to the receiver, something that speaks of the kind of person he/she is.

It is our joy as branches of the vine to bring glory to God. That's what verse 8 says anyway. So, how do we give glory to God? By producing the kind of fruit that says more about who God is than about who we are. By producing the kind of fruit that God calls for rather than what might be our preference. That means we need to learn about the God we love. We need to know who this God is and what it is that this God wants before we can bring the offering; before we can produce the fruit that gives God glory.

We do that by abiding in the vine, by dwelling on the words of Jesus until the words of Jesus become our words. Until we will his will; until we are so attached, so much a part of the vine that it is his blood that courses through our veins; it is his love that causes our hearts to pound; it is his joy that fulfills us. Apart from that, we wither. Cut off from that source, we feel, and we are empty. Filled by that love, we can produce the fruit that gives God glory. Not our will, but God's will be done.

So, rocks and stones. They sit out there, waiting. You see the real gift is not the purchase of the stones. That's already been done. The real gift will be when we work side by side and lay them out where she wants them. The real gift will be when we work in the garden, building up the borders, defining the contours, laying down the foundations as she directs. The gift we give, the fruit we bear, is the willingness to work, in love.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Easter people, we have been saved by the Risen Christ, the life-giving Vine.

We abide in Love, the life-giving Vine.

We are branches of the Vine—sustained, nurtured, and pruned by Love.

We have no life apart from Love, the life-giving Vine.

When we make our home in the Vine, and the Vine makes a home in us, we bear the fruit of Love.

We produce the fruit of Love, the life-giving Vine.

Easter people, how shall we bear the fruit of Love, the life-giving Vine?

**We will love and learn to love as we rest, play, work, and build community with God and one another.
Amen.**

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, November 2023.

Prayers of the People

For all the blessings of this life,

we give thanks to You, Creator God.

For families, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and strangers,
who nurture us, that the love of God may grow within.

That Your love, your Word, like a seed,
may grow to produce in us, good fruit.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For the leaders of various nations and cities,
that they may lead with strong hearts and gentle hands and generous spirits,
with compassion and mercy, with wisdom and grace.
May they reflect your will guiding all their actions and decisions.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who serve in harm's way,
those who live in dangerous places,
those who live in areas of war and strife,
those who live in fear,
those who worry about employment, bills, food,
and struggle just to find dignity in life.
May your grace bring peace and safety to all people, one to another.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who suffer from any illness or dis-ease—
of mind, body, or spirit.
Restore these, and all those we carry in our hearts, to fullness of health—
health as only you, O God, can bring.
May your mercy shower each of us with healing mercy and love.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

For those who are dying, and for those who have died.
Send forth your comforting love.
Give solace to those who mourn.
Console those who grieve.
May your grace surround us
like a mantle upon our heads,
a shawl upon our shoulders,
a hand, to hold our hand.

May your love be like a seed, taking root and growing strong.

Amen

Written by Terri Pilarski and posted on RevGalBlogPals, <https://revgalblogpals.org/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/08/prayers-of-people-like-seed.html>.

Prayer of Confession

(based on 1 John 4)

Merciful One,
you know when we are afraid to love;

you know when we are too cowardly
to show mercy.
Remind us again
that perfect love casts out such fears.
Surround us and strengthen us with your perfect love,
even in the face of our imperfections.
Imbue us with a love so strong,
with such growth toward perfection,
that we may cast aside our pride
and embrace the power of love.

Words of Assurance

(based on John 15)

Christ is the vine. We are simply branches.
If we abide in Christ, Christ's words will abide in us.
Ask for whatever you wish in Christ's name
and it will be granted.
In the name of Christ,
you who seek forgiveness are forgiven!
In the name of Christ,
you who seek forgiveness are forgiven!

*Adapted from The Abingdon Worship Annual 2012, © 2011 Abingdon Press. Posted on the **Worship Elements** page of the **Ministry Matters** website. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/prayer-of-confession-easter-5-b.html>.*

Benediction

Branches of the Vine, go from this place blessed by Love to work in love with your family, your friends, your neighbors, and strangers who will become friends, bearing the fruit of the life-giving Vine as you cultivate abundant life wherever you go. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, November 2023.

Sixth Sunday of Easter – We Love One Another

May 5, 2024

[John 15:9-17](#)

Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

If you've ever watched a commercial for a new medicine or read the warning labels on the back of your laundry detergent, perhaps you, like me, have had moments where you ask, "*Who did what to warrant clarifying that?*" (I mean, really, who is going to take a medication they *know* they are allergic to??)

Except, I'm also the person who gets right and left confused when giving or following directions, and I still can't unscrew anything—be it a peanut butter jar or a screw in the wall—without saying out loud, “Right to tight; left to loose.” It seems that there are skills and ideas, no matter how common sense or complicated we think they may be, that come more easily to some than others. And maybe that's just part of being human.

Similarly, there are teachings in the church that we might take as common sense and obvious that are actually far from it. Last week, we focused on the first part of John 15 where Jesus very clearly tells us that we, as branches connected to the Vine, are called to bear fruit. Some of our congregants may have heard this phrase—*bear fruit*—so often, they think they know what it means. Others may be new to church, or new to the United Methodist Church, and have *no idea* what this means. But in reality, every single one of us can probably use a refresher on what it means for us as Christians to bear fruit. That is what this week's text is all about!

As you plan worship, then, consider how you can extend and build on decisions you made for last week's worship. If you emphasized grapevines and fruit or other crops that are native to your area, maintain that theme this week. Even though the vines or fruit are not explicitly named in this week's text, we cannot understand Jesus' command to love one another apart from his declaration in last week's text, “I am the vine, and you are the branches.” So, let the physical space of worship help those gathered remember and connect last week to this week.

Consider, too, what practices you could carry over into this week. If you engaged in a prayer of confession last week, try extending and deepening a time of confession and repentance during worship this week. If you provided time for quiet reflection and meditation, do so again, but this time, include a guiding prompt or question like, “How is God calling you to love your neighbors?” or “Listen for God's voice calling you friend. How does that feel in your body?” You might also think about specific ways to enliven this text. Perhaps you can follow a prayer of confession with a time of passing the peace, with the instruction to say, “God's love be with you” to one another. Or maybe you want to incorporate a time of testimony and invite a congregant to share about how Jesus' command to love one another as Jesus loves us has impacted that person's life as a disciple. Whatever you choose, find ways to incarnate Jesus' words that are meaningful and appropriate to your context as the place God has put down roots of Love, so that we might bear the fruit of loving one another in our homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities.

PREACHING NOTES

“So, did you have fun with your rocks?” Someone asked me that after I revealed our gift to my wife, and it involved lots of big rocks. So, this is “Rocks Redux,” I guess.

Back to the question – “Did I have fun with the rocks?” Well, yes, I did, come to think of it. It was fun finding all sorts of shapes in the rocks as we pulled them from the pile. We had an Italy, and Indiana, a rubber chicken shape, and even a Star Trek phaser - the old kind that looked like a squirt gun, not the later one that looked like the communicator. (I always wondered about that, when they changed it. I kept expecting Kirk to shoot his ear off when trying to call Scotty to beam him up and grabbing the phaser by mistake. Sorry, geek alert there.)

Where was I? Oh, yes fun with rocks. And it was fun watching her trying to find the right size and shape to build the various walls she wanted around the trees and things. She kept stacking them up and then pulling them apart, or sending us to the pile to find one that “looks like it would go here!” Right. That was fun.

Seriously though, the real fun was following orders. That sounds odd, I know. But full disclosure here, we would never have done that if it hadn’t been for her. Even while we were doing it, I noticed the kids looking up and praying that the dark clouds would get together and send the storm to get us out of the task we agreed to. “Didn’t you say God always answers prayer, Dad? Well, where’s the rain?!?” But despite our reluctance, we had fun because it made her happy. Because it was a way of honoring her. Because it was fun to be, for a few moments anyway, focused on a task together and not wrapped up in our own individual skin. Our personal joy was lost in the corporate joy that was generated by a desire to show love, to give love, to act lovingly.

That was the secret Jesus was trying to give to those frightened followers who were on the brink of a life they didn’t sign up for. In this “farewell discourse,” Jesus tries to fill them up with all sorts of truth, all sorts of handles for grabbing hold of life. In the midst of it, he says simply, “Just hang on to me. Stay connected to all that I was and am and will be. Remember my example; sense my ongoing presence; lean forward to the completion - yours and the world’s.”

I am intrigued by verse 11. I know there is a whole lot more than that one verse. I know there is big stuff here. You’d expect big stuff from a farewell sermon. We could talk about obedience again; it is still there. We could talk about that odd little statement about who is choosing whom in verse sixteen. We could even talk about sacrifice, how Jesus says there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends - right before he goes to lay down his life for his friends, and his enemies, and those who don’t know or care about him. No greater love. That would be a powerful conversation, don’t you think?

But instead, I was intrigued by verse eleven: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full.” Joy is one of those elusive qualities, one of those “I’ll know when I see it” kinds of things. Or maybe, “I’ll know it when I feel it.” It is a momentary experience, isn’t it, a passion that grips us, that lifts us up and makes us something more than we were before. If only we could hold on to it.

Have you ever done an image search for “joy” pictures? The most common images that come through are various people named Joy. That’s not terribly helpful. But the others are interesting. They are usually of movement - dance, running, jumping - jumping for joy. It is like when joy hits us, we can’t be still.

Often, there is more than one figure in the picture. You can’t keep joy in, and you can’t keep it to yourself. Mark Twain supposedly said that “grief can take care of itself, but to get the full value of joy, you must have somebody to divide it with.” Joy is a shared experience, rather than a solitary one.

That might help us understand what Jesus said. “That my joy may be in you and your joy might be full.” He is saying that our joy, the human experience, that fleeting but powerful passion that fills us up and threatens to burn us out, is not complete until it is joined to his joy, the holy, divine joy that knows that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. Our joy is complete - or mature, or perfect, it is all the same word in Greek - only when woven into his joy.

Joy is fleeting when we attempt to generate it from within. We can sustain it only so long. We can be “up” only for so long on our own. But when we abide in him, when we are branches of the vine, then there are “rivers of living water flowing from the heart” — a never-ending source, an overwhelming joy.

This eternal joy is a gift that comes from Jesus. From abiding in him. And he tells us that to abide in him is to obey his commandment to love one another as he loved us. To love as he loves. It is to look outward. Joy is found not in the contentment of satisfying our own desires, but in service to those we love as he loves. It is in acts of service; it is in healing and helping; it is in holding shaky hands and calming troubled hearts; it is in honoring those we love.

“Joy’s soul lies in the doing” wrote William Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*. That, if anything, tells us that joy is not in happy endings, but in reaching out in love, in giving yourself over to loving, even when it costs something to do so. Joy sustains, even when our arms grow tired in the labor of love.

“Look! Here is one shaped like New Jersey!” “That should do nicely. Put it right here.”

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Easter people, Jesus chose you and calls you friend!

We abide in Christ because Christ abides in us.

Jesus made a home among us to show us how to love.

We abide in Love because Love abides in us.

Jesus invites us in and beckons us to come to the Table to know the joy that comes when we love one another the way God loves us.

We abide in Joy because Joy abides with us.

Easter people, Jesus welcomes you home!

We come to make our home with God and one another, bound together by Love and enlivened by Joy. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, January 2023.

Opening Prayer

We, who so often take the wonders of creation for granted, welcome the opportunity to make a joyful noise before you, O God. We come here this morning to worship and to praise you, glad that we live in this country filled with such diverse and beautiful examples of your creation. Yet, joyful noises are not easy for everyone to make, as we come from differing situations and lifestyles. Some are burdened down with the stresses of daily living and all that involves; some wearied from tasks of serving others; some worried over the state of the world and where that is all leading. Speak to us all, O God, in the stillness of this time and remind us of Jesus’ willingness to take our burdens upon himself and to learn from him - to experience his gentleness and steadfast love for all. Jesus also offers us his joy so that our joy might be complete. Confident in these promises, we offer this time of worship to you, O God,

praying that it may reflect our praise and thanksgiving for the gifts of creation and for all that Jesus has done for us. This we pray in his name. **Amen.**

*Written by Moira Laidlaw and posted on her **Liturgies Online** website, <http://www.liturgiesonline.com.au/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/opening-prayer-easter-6-b.html>.*

Prayer of Confession

Almighty God,
you love us, but we have not loved you;
you call, but we have not listened.
We walk away from neighbors in need,
wrapped up in our own concerns.
We have gone along with evil,
with pride, quarrelling, and divisiveness.

Holy God, help us to face up to ourselves,
so that, as you move toward us in mercy,
we may repent, turn to you, and receive mercy;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Posted on the Presbyterian Church (USA) website. <http://www.pcusa.org/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2014/09/prayer-of-confession-as-you-have-loved.html>.

Benediction

Beloved, may God bless you with the strength to love one another as God loves each and every one of you, that you may find the complete, total, and everlasting joy that comes when we abide together with God who is Love. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, January 2023.

Seventh Sunday of Easter – We Share Christ

May 12, 2024 - *(If Ascension is not observed here)*

[John 17:6-19](#)

Color: White

PLANNING NOTES

For all the stories about Jesus and teachings from Jesus we have in the gospels, we don't have a record of a lot of prayers from Jesus. Sure, we have the two versions of what we now call the Lord's Prayer ([Matthew](#) and [Luke](#)), and let's not forget Jesus' prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. But if we tried to put together a book of all of Jesus' prayers recorded in the gospels, we'd barely have a pamphlet! Perhaps that's why Jesus' prayer in John 17 is so meaningful. It's like the curtain is pulled back, and we get to listen in on the things Jesus talks about with the other members of the Trinity. And

while we engage with only a part of John 17 this week, these fourteen verses are rich with instructions about how we as Christ followers are to love one another and God.

Notably, the lectionary cuts off the reading before we get to one of the more well-known verses in this passage when Jesus prays, “...so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:22). That said, in the liturgical resources, you will find prayers that focus on Christian unity because the early portion of John 17 points us toward what it means to live together as Christ followers. And in a time such as this—not unlike when the gospel of John was written—we need to take time to pray for unity. We need the opportunity to submit ourselves as individuals *and* as a community to the work of living in peace with one another, working together toward the flourishing of all people.

This text also raises the question—again—of what it means to glorify God. Jesus says that he has been glorified in all that belongs to him—including you and me! Amazingly, though, it doesn’t seem that we have to *do* much of anything for Christ to be glorified through us except receive God’s message and believe. While that may still seem like a tall order, I wonder what it might mean to create space in worship to *be* and to *believe* together; to practice actively receiving the good news without jumping to explain what it means and how that means we should live; to bask in the glorious gift of Jesus coming to be with us just as we are in a particular time and place; to give God glory by opening ourselves to the vulnerable, humble, and profound strength of accepting God’s gift without jumping up immediately to get to work. How many times do we hide behind action to avoid being vulnerable before God and one another?

Yet do not forget Jesus’ request in these verses: *protect them*. Not protect them *from being vulnerable* but protect them so that they *may be vulnerable*. As you plan worship this week, consider how sharing Christ is about protecting one another and creating spaces and communities where everyone is safe enough to bravely live as their full selves before God and one another. Perhaps this comes through a prayer of confession about when the church hasn’t shown up for vulnerable members of the community. Maybe this is a time for testimony, a moment for congregants to share the impact that having a safe, protected space to be themselves has made on their lives. Whatever you do, find ways to receive this prayer that Christ prays for each of us, while also inviting the gathered body to be the answer to Jesus’ prayer in your neighborhood.

PREACHING NOTES

There are so many threads in this tapestry that the picture might be a bit obscured. And to spend the time picking them all apart is beyond the realm of these notes, which are supposed to spark your imagination, preacher. They are designed to get your creative juices flowing so that you can tell your story in your context with the message that God has placed on your heart. So, there are many jumping-off places here. Let’s think for a moment.

We could talk about that “sanctify” ending. Jesus calls on the Spirit of protection so that we can be made fit for God’s purposes. Jesus hands us over to God and asks God to let us live and work in this world, but as signs of God’s presence, pointing beyond the world in which we work. We could talk about what this protection means and what it doesn’t mean.

Or we could talk about unity, one of my favorite themes. Jesus prays that we (that's you and me and everyone else) would be one as "we are one." We are to be as close as Jesus and God; we are called to function as parts of the Trinity, aspects of the same thing, different, but one in essence and in hope. That is what community really means. It doesn't mean individuality is lost; differences make the whole what it is. But it does mean that we acknowledge our need for the other, acknowledge that we are somehow incomplete without the other. How can we fight among ourselves? How can we hate and cast stones at one another when we are part of the same whole? We are hating and casting stones at ourselves. The church is many things, but in this prayer, it is clear that the church is called to be one, to be united.

Or we could talk about that in-the-world and out-of-the-world language in the prayer. Yes, on one level, it is Jesus' farewell address; he is on his way out of the world. But then we also believe that Jesus is in the world, still today. Just like we live in this world, but we don't belong to the world. Our eyes are on eternity; our true home is in the kingdom. which might have embassies here in this world, which might break through, which might peek around the edges, but it isn't here. At least not yet.

Or we could talk about the hundred other things that I haven't figured out yet. Maybe you saw something, or wondered something. or figured something out from this prayer that you didn't know before, or that confirmed something inside of you. Or maybe we could simply talk about what it is like to know that Jesus is praying for us, what a blessing that is, even when we don't always know what is in that prayer. Even when we don't know how to respond to that prayer, or even what we should be looking for. Just knowing about the prayer means something. We're coming up on Aldersgate Day, May 24, the day we remember John Wesley and his heart strangely warmed experience, as he finally understood that Jesus' love and salvation were gifts for him too.

But instead of all of that, the words that jumped out at me were those in verse ten: "All mine are yours and yours are mine and I have been glorified in them." I know that really says more about who Jesus is than it does about us. But it also speaks deeply of relationship and community. Peterson (*The Message*) translates the last part of the verse like this: "And my life is on display in them." How we live and love in this world is the presentation of Christ to those who don't know him yet. How we share and give does not just reflect on us, but it reflects on Jesus. This means how we treat one another, how we honor one another, and how we celebrate one another and the commitments we have made are part of our faith. And Christ is glorified by the way we live in community.

Our argument in this series and especially this week is that our calling is to live a life of love, and our fundamental belief is that sharing Christ is the loving thing to do. However, the methodology for sharing is as important as the sharing itself. Loving is an act of respect; it is a way of honoring others, the objects of our love—especially those whom society has neglected, overlooked, or ignored. That's what "see all the people" means—that we will share Christ, by sharing that love, with those who no longer believe that they are worth loving. We share by inviting and including; we lead with hospitality and not with judgment. We meet real needs with a spirit of welcome. We lead with gratitude not reluctant service, but a pouring out of abundance and equity. Throughout it all, sometimes with words but mostly through acts of love, we share Christ. Because we believe that there is nothing more loving than including others in the circle of Christ-followers.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Easter people, raise your voices, for you belong to the Risen Christ!

We belong to Christ, and so we share in Christ together.

Just as we share in Christ together, so we are called to share Christ with the world.

We share Christ by proclaiming the good news of God's love to the world.

How will you share God's love with the world?

By loving, respecting, and honoring our neighbors, especially those the world neglects, overlooks, and ignores.

Easter people, you belong to the Risen Christ!

Because we belong to Christ, we will share Christ's love and belonging everywhere we go.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, January 2023.

Prayer for the Day

God of all creation
who called every being into life
who is mindful of humankind in all its diversity
who embodies us with dignity,
granting different gifts and talents to shape life in this world
we ask for your Spirit to unite us
where we face lack of understanding and disunity
in our churches, in our communities, in our countries.
And in silence, we lay before you the burdens of our hearts.

(Silence)

We ask for your Spirit to unite us
in the face of the conflicts, hatred, and violation of life
experienced in so many regions of the earth
and in silence, we bring to you the pain of the victims.

(Silence)

We ask for your Spirit to unite us
wherever fear prevents us from caring for our neighbour,
from meeting people of different ethnicities, cultures,
and faith communities with respect
and in silence, we bring to you the brokenness of human relationships.

(Silence)

God of all creation,
in Christ, we are reconciled,
and so we ask for your uniting Spirit

to help us to overcome all our divisions
that we may live in peace.

Amen.

Posted on the Monthly Prayers page of the Christian Aid website, <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog, <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2017/09/prayer-for-unity-amidst-diversity.html>.

Prayer of Confession

The act of confessing our sin is not simply a recitation of our faults and wrongs, but also an opportunity to receive God's mercy and share in that abundant grace. Confident of God's love for us, let us offer our prayers, first in silence.

Offer silent prayers of confession.

Holy God, we ask for your help, your power, your Spirit, so that we can amend our lives and grow more each day into the image of Christ. We confess that we fear what is different. We confess that it's easier to lock the doors of our community than to receive those who don't look like we look, love like we love, or vote the way we vote. We confess that we have not lived out your call to share in abundant life and unconditional love. We believe that you have the power to turn us around to a more inclusive way of living, so we ask you to do that. We ask you to give us the courage to change. We ask that you give us the energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to be your people in all we say and do. Amen.

Written by Beth Merrill Neel on her blog, 'Hold Fast to What Is Good'. Used with permission. <https://holdfasttowhatisgood.com/liturgy/prayer-of-confession/>.

Benediction

Lord, Make Us One United in You

Lord, make us one with you—one in heart, mind, spirit, and love. Make us instruments of your glory and vessels of your praise. Cause our complete being to rejoice and find rest in your perfect will. We are ever inscribed upon your heart and before you. Therefore, continue to pray for us this day, to watch over us, and to make us pure in every way. Purify our families, our relationships, our decisions, our minds, our thoughts, our deeds until we reflect your glory. Let your righteous hand be seen in us and in the world. We go forth empowered by Your Spirit, willing to do Your will, and ever ready to love Your people. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Written by Stacey Cole Wilson, in The Africana Worship Book, Year B (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 216-17.