

Easter 7C & Graduates 2025 John 17:20-26

It may seem strange since school is out and Memorial Day is behind us, but we are just now celebrating the last Sunday of the Easter season. We get four weeks of Advent preparation and six weeks of Lenten penitence, but we get seven whole weeks—a week of weeks—for celebrating the joy of Easter. I'd like to tell you that it was by careful design that we planned the graduates' recognition for this liturgical day, but that was really more coincidence. Still, Jay and Camden have had a similar season of celebration: final band concerts and ball games, senior nights and recognitions, parties and graduation ceremonies. One of the last of these events was baccalaureate; I was in the audience this year as it was the Roaring Spring Ministerium's turn to lead the service. But for the past few baccalaureates, with the help of our congregation's graduates, I've gotten to pray for the graduating class. Having been a student for many years, I know what it's like to complete academic requirements, and having been a teacher for several years, I know what it's like to assign and then evaluate those requirements. But I appreciate stepping out of both of those roles to take part in that event where the graduates get to hear someone pray for them. We're taught to pray for others, and we should; and we're taught how to pray for ourselves, and we should do that, too. But there are times when we need to know that someone is praying for us, which brings us to our gospel for today.

After reading the accounts of the empty tomb and Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, the lectionary takes us back to the evening before Jesus' arrest. Jesus washes the disciples' feet at dinner and then begins a long final address to prepare them for his upcoming death, resurrection, and ascension. After Jesus commands the disciples to love and serve others according to his example, and after Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to help them navigate discipleship in his absence, after talking *to* them for chapter after chapter, Jesus starts talking *about* them to the Father.

In the other gospels, Jesus prays alone in the garden while the disciples, waiting at a distance, fall asleep. In John's gospel, Jesus prays in the disciples' presence: first for himself, then for those original disciples who were listening to him, then for everyone else

who will eventually become disciples because of their witness, which includes us. Jesus prays for them and us to have the same kind of unity with each other and with God that the Trinity has within themselves. Everything that Jesus is, he wants us to be—not just spectators, beneficiaries, or commentators, but full participants in relationship with God who is abundantly blessing and mercifully healing the world.

I can't help thinking of the parallels for Camden and Jay and all of those who are in the midst of transitioning roles in this graduation season. Jesus had taught the disciples as much as he could teach them; their time together was almost up. With him no longer present to give them direct instruction, they were nevertheless being called out into the world to put into living practice what they had learned. Jesus promised ongoing encouragement through the Spirit, so like our graduates, who I'm pretty sure are not getting kicked out of their houses any time soon, they can expect continued support for whatever lies ahead. But Jesus anticipates a shift in his relationship with the disciples: they are not just his students anymore; he is inviting them into a fuller union of what they have so far only observed and learned about from the outside. According to Jesus, this unity is not something the disciples achieve for themselves; it's what he asks on their behalf when he prays to the Father.

For all of Jesus' attempts to prepare them, the disciples really had no idea what the future was going to require of them. That might sound familiar to us, especially when we are in times of transition. Whether from scripture or Dr. Seuss or I understand the University of Maryland got Kermit the Frog to give the commencement address this year, there is good advice and tried and tested wisdom to steer us, no matter what chapter of our lives we find ourselves writing. But let's not lose sight of the incredible thing that Jesus did for his disciples when their world was about to change: Jesus prayed for them. Jesus prayed that they would be one with him, so whatever they were called to do, they would do it through the power and presence of God. Jesus loves us so much, he spent some of his last earthly moments asking for us to be as united to God the Father as he is. What road of life can't we navigate when God is walking with us?