

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner  
The Seventh Sunday of Easter (C)  
Sunday, June 2, 2019

*Acts 16:16-34 | Psalm 97*  
*Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 | John 17:20-26*

I've never had this happen before but someone at Christ Church came up to me recently and made a sermon request.

No kidding!

She said, "Do you think we could ever explore the people in the Bible that are most like us?"

We talked a little bit about who she thought that meant.

It reminded me of when I was in the discernment process to see if the ordained ministry would be a good fit.

Back then, one of the hoops we had to jump through was meeting all sorts of important diocesan representatives, ordained and not ordained, in a daylong round-robin type environment.

All the candidates started in a big school gymnasium for a terrifying general meeting about which I remember nothing.

And then we went individually from classroom to classroom to have more intimate conversations with these "important people" from around the diocese.

At the time I was working in an unpopular profession for someone considering the priesthood in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington.

During the smaller interviews, I went into a room where they questioned my work and I thought I wasn't going to make it out of that room alive much less finish the interviews that day.

So after that exchange, I felt like I had nothing to lose... and when asked other questions, I just told the truth.

Like when they read the parable of the man with two sons from Luke's gospel account,<sup>1</sup> they asked me who I was in the story.

I said plainly, "I'm the older brother."

"I'm the one who gets bitter and frustrated when I do the right thing and the one who breaks all the rules gets the party."

I remember they made a face when I said that.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 15:11-32

Next interview, they read another section of Luke's gospel where Jesus visits the home of his friend Martha and her sister Mary.<sup>2</sup>

This time I was asked what I thought of the story.

Where was the energy for me... or something equally as obscure.

I said, "I'm Martha... and frankly, I'm not ashamed to admit it."

"Someone has to do all this work while the rest are fawning at the feet of Jesus."

Hopefully, I said it in a much more subtle and profound manner, but probably not.

And, I'll be honest – if I were in jail after being beaten and tortured and the prison doors opened up and the chains were unfastened I cannot promise you I would be sitting in the jail cell the next day singing hymns to God.

The reason I bring these examples up is that I feel we go out of our way to make theology seem too difficult, too unavailable, too irrelevant to our lives today.

And if I can do anything while I'm a preacher, I want to promise you – convince you – that is not true.

The lessons passed down to us need to be taken into context, of course.

The Bible is a guidepost – not a hitching post.

But there is still learning for us.

In today's gospel we hear some of the most meaningful words in all of scripture.

Here they are in a more contemporary translation:

I am praying not only for them but also for those who WILL<sup>3</sup> believe in me.

The goal is for all to become one heart and mind – just as you, Father, are in me and I in you.

I pray they, too, might be one heart and mind with us.

Then the world might believe that you sent me.

And we will be unified and together as we are – I in them and you in me.

Father, I want them to be with me.

So that your love for me might be in them exactly as I am in them.<sup>4</sup>

The context for this is important.

It is Thursday evening before Jesus is crucified.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 10:38-42

<sup>3</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> The Message

He knows he will be betrayed, handed over to his longtime enemies, and deserted by his very best friends.

(By the way, I think sometimes this painful part of the story hurts Jesus more than any of the physical brutality he experiences at the hands of Rome. And, I think this is the kind of pain we all understand and have experienced before.)

Knowing what is to come, he brings together his disciples... his closest friends.

And what does he do?

He prays.

He gives them words of encouragement and hope.

He prays that they might endure the challenges that are sure to come their way.

He prays that they might find strength in unity.

He prays that they might be drawn to one another, as Jesus is drawn to the Father.

And here, I think, is the best part.

He prays not just for them but for all who believe in Jesus because of their example.

Friends, that means Jesus prayed for us.

That night, in the upper room, Jesus prayed for you and for me.

We are in this space at this time because of that prayer.

We are here because someone told us about Jesus.

Maybe you heard about God's unconditional love from a friend or a coach or a co-worker.

Maybe you grew up in the church as I did and really didn't know another way.

To be honest, I knew about Jesus but I didn't know Jesus until I was in high school.

However you got here, it is because someone somewhere shared with you that God loves us all and, inspired by that promise and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we came to believe.<sup>5</sup>

Think about it...

Someone told the person who told us...

And that someone told them...

And someone told them...

All the way back to that upper room where Jesus prayed for his friends to share this message.

But in just a few passages of John's gospel today, we get to see how we fit into the larger story.

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<sup>5</sup> The Rev. David Lose

How important we are to the overall and ongoing arc and message of the Bible.

And if you listen closely to our prayer following communion you will hear this complex theology.

We are very members incorporate in the body and the blessed company of all faithful people.

And are also heirs through hope of your kingdom.

We are to continue in that holy fellowship.

We are to do as Thomas did who, thanks be to God, said what we would have said if asked to believe but did not see.

We are to do as Martha does, work so that others might come to know and understand the message of love in Jesus.

We are to do as the Older Brother, who is honest when he says what we all think – “I get it, but it just doesn’t seem fair.”

We are in it with everyone who came before us and all who come after us...

Who struggle at work or home or school.

Who deal with setbacks in professional or personal lives.

Who get a difficult diagnosis or face an uncertain future.

What we learn through today’s gospel lesson, is that we do not face any of this alone.

Jesus promises to send help.

To send the Holy Spirit to us.

We are given the opportunity today to remember that Jesus’s promise to the disciples then is a promise for us today.

God will be with us, whatever comes our way, in the highs and lows of this life, and even through death to new life.

It is the promise of resurrection.

It is the promise of hope.

It is a promise we need to hear.

It is a promise we can receive.

And it is a promise we must share.

Even if we are Martha.

Or the Older Brother.

Or Thomas.

Or just Elizabeth.

Amen.