

Sermon for 5-13-18; John 17:6-19
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Today's Gospel reading, just like last Sunday's, is part of the long farewell discourse that Jesus speaks to his disciples in John. These are words he spoke on the last night of his earthly life -- after the Passover meal where he shared the bread and wine amongst them, and before his arrest and trial. Last week, he was talking about love and friendship, telling his disciples that they were his friends if they followed his commandment to love one another as he had loved them.

The verses we just heard, though, strike a different tone:

"And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you... While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me... But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves... I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them..."

Jesus isn't talking to the disciples anymore. They're still there, of course; they're hearing every word, but he's not talking to them. These are words of prayer, and Jesus is talking to God. He's praying for his dear friends -- for their safety, for their resolve, for their well-being. The disciples themselves know that something enormous is about to happen, but they don't understand yet, they don't have any idea what the next three days hold. But Jesus knows; he knows that tomorrow he will be nailed to a cross, and for his friends it will seem as if the world is crashing down around them. And in this precious moment, he prays for them.

Think about the relationships, the deep, abiding connections Jesus has with these men, and with the women who joined them, like Mary Magdalene. These were no casual friendships; these people were not just his colleagues in ministry. These were his dearest friends, the ones who had dropped everything else in their lives to answer his call and follow him. For three years they had spent every day and night together, traveling from place to place and spreading the Good News of peace and love and mercy and forgiveness of sins. Jesus was their rabbi, their spiritual teacher; he was also their friend, their brother and their Lord.

So Jesus prays for his disciples. He asks God for four things: to keep them united, to give them his joy, to protect them from evil influences, and to empower them in their mission.ⁱ

I can't help but wonder how Jesus was feeling as he prayed these words... was he worried, or wistful, or even afraid -- not for himself, but for his friends? Was he wishing he could turn back time, or at least slow things down, before leaving them? When he spoke these words, when he prayed his heart's deepest desire for his friends to be protected, I wonder, were there tears in his eyes? After all, he was divine, of course, but he was also human. The heart that beat inside his chest was just like yours and mine.

In this moment of love and prayer and concern for his disciples, Jesus is deeply vulnerable. His heart is on display; his love is loyal and fierce and protective. He knows he has to leave them, but that doesn't mean he wants to go.

The emotion of this prayer brings to mind another Gospel image, one that may be unfamiliar. We're used to talking about Jesus as Messiah, Lord, Savior, rabbi, healer, Prince of Peace, Redeemer, and so on... but what about Jesus the Mother Hen? I'm not making this up, it's in Matthew chapter 23 verse 37: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings..."

Jesus the Mother Hen, who guides and nurtures and protects her chicks. Jesus the Mother Hen, praying for those chicks, asking God to be with them in the days to come.

As I reflected on this passage during the past week, I remembered a picture book that I hadn't read for at least five years, but I used to know by heart. I went upstairs to my son's bedroom and searched the bookshelves until I found it: *Wherever You Are, My Love Will Find You* by Nancy Tillman. This used to be one of Jesse's favorite bedtime stories. It's written in the voice of a parent speaking to a child, but I think it could also be Mother Hen Jesus, talking to the disciples, or even to us....

"I wanted you more than you will ever know,
so I sent love to follow wherever you go.
It's high as you wish it. It's quick as an elf.
You'll never outgrow it. It stretches itself!
So climb any mountain... climb up to the sky!
My love will find you. My love can fly!
Make a big splash! Go out on a limb!
My love will find you. My love can swim!
It never gets lost, never fades, never ends...
if you're working... or playing... or sitting with friends.
You can dance 'til you're dizzy... paint 'til you're blue...
There's no place, not one, that my love can't find you.
And if someday you're lonely, or someday you're sad,
or you strike out at baseball, or think you've been bad...
just lift up your face, feel the wind in your hair.
That's me, my sweet baby, my love is right there.
In the green of the grass... in the smell of the sea...
in the clouds floating by... at the top of a tree...
in the sound crickets make at the end of the day...
'You are loved. You are loved. You are loved,' they all say.
My love is so high, and so wide, and so deep,
it's always right there, even when you're asleep.
So hold your head high and don't be afraid
to march to the front of your own parade.

If you're still my small babe or you're all the way grown,
my promise to you is you're never alone.
You are my angel, my darling, my star...
and my love will find you, wherever you are."ⁱⁱ

These are words of love, meant to build a child up, to inspire confidence and reassurance that through ups and downs, through time and distance and all the changes of life (and death) and the unknown, that love will endure.

Christ's intimate heart prayer for his disciples is much the same... it is as if he's saying, 'God, thank you for the gift of my precious friends. I love them so very much, and I know I have to leave them, but it won't be easy. They will not understand, and they will hurt for me. Please watch over them, keep them strong and safe, and help them remember their joy and their mission. Let them know that, even when they cannot see me, my love and my truth and my blessing are with them forever.'

Jesus of Nazareth is gone from our sight. He is not here; he has risen; he has ascended. And yet, Jesus the Christ is with us still. Christ is alive, and Love is alive, and Christ is Love. Alleluia!
Amen.

ⁱ from *Comments RCL Commentary* by Chris Haslam, at
<http://www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/beas7m.shtml>

ⁱⁱ Tillman, Nancy. *Wherever You Are*. NY: Feiwel and Friends, 2010.