

Easter 7, Year A
May 4, 2008

RCL
Acts 1:6-14
Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36
1 Peter 4:12-14: 5:6-11
John 17:1-11

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My husband is retiring after 34 years at The College of Wooster. On Friday he taught his last class. I know that many of you have gone through this passage, this thing called retirement, and you know how it feels. Actually, there seems to be quite a variety of feelings.

There's relief, certainly, relief that one doesn't have to keep up the same back-breaking pace any more. But there's grief, too. There's loss – the loss of co-workers, which can be a mixed blessing, the loss of the salary one is used to drawing, the loss of a way of life with all its routines and patterns. In Jack's case there's the loss of daily contact with college students, which he has treasured, and of the opportunity to teach them to sing together. He has directed The Wooster Chorus for 32 years.

I've come to the conclusion, watching Jack prepare for this change in his life, that no one can really know what this feels like until it happens. And no matter how much you plan for it, in the end it happens suddenly. My brother Harv, who flew as a Delta airlines pilot for 30 years, had to step out of his 767 after a transatlantic flight and walk away. No matter how much you plan for it, change can be very sudden.

Now, you're going to think I'm awfully old, being associated with all these retired people. I am old. That, after all, implies wisdom. But I'm not retiring. I've just begun my ministry and now is not the time for me to stop. I don't really know what it feels like to retire, but I have heard about it from those I love. Anyway, the round of "last" events is occurring for Jack and with it the round of farewells.

Jesus, too, is leaving in the gospel today. He isn't retiring. Who can imagine Jesus retiring? But he is saying goodbye and doing it, by the account left us in the gospel of John, in a way which is very different from our way of saying goodbye.

This passage we read this morning from the 17th chapter of John, is part of a long section of that gospel which is called the Farewell Discourse. Jesus has not yet been tried and crucified in this passage. He has just eaten his last supper with his disciples and he has washed their feet. He has instructed them with the words "love one another as I have loved you."

Now, in his final words before his arrest, he is not speaking to the disciples. He's speaking to God, in a way that the disciples can overhear. We have the privilege of hearing, in this passage, a part of Jesus' prayer to his Father.

His words are not of the kind we use when we're saying goodbye. We are likely to reminisce about the good times, even to glorify the good times, and to give advice, perhaps, to those who will stay behind.

Jesus doesn't give advice. He gives one command – love one another. And he does not offer fond goodbyes and tributes and wishes for a good life. Jesus makes use of his limited farewell time in a very different way.

He prays to the Father – for us. Jesus' concern is for his followers who will now be left without him and he prays that the Father will protect “those whom you gave me” in the hope that “they may be one, as we are one.” This final prayer is all about Jesus' love for us.

I wonder how much deeper our commitment and our zeal for Christ's mission might be if we thought of ourselves as “those for whom Jesus prays?” We are, in fact, the community of followers for whom Jesus prays.

He prays for our protection, he leaves us with the Holy Spirit to guide us. What loving and selfless acts directed to us by the One who is one with God and also one with us!

On this last Sunday of Easter we have already celebrated Jesus' ascension into heaven. Ascension Day was this past Thursday and many of us were together for a festive potluck meal and a celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

What we celebrate on this holy day is that Jesus' life on earth has come to completion. He descended to us, was born of Mary, lived among us, lived and taught God's love for all and was betrayed and crucified for it.

He rose from the dead, then, overcoming death, and he appeared to his disciples so that they would believe. Then, finally, he ascended into heaven, joining earth to heaven and heaven to earth for all time.

Now life on earth is sacred, honored by the presence of God, and life in heaven knows the human condition and is full of understanding and forgiveness and compassion.

All of us must say goodbye in one way or another over and over again in our lives. Those who retire are privileged to have had work, especially rewarding work, which they can leave. And our farewells are full of memories and leave-taking and the breaking of ties.

In all our departures may we always remember that we are the people for whom Jesus prays. We are the people worthy of Jesus' prayer and of the protection and love of the Father.
Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria