

They'll Know we are Christians by our Love

John 17:1-11

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

17 After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, 2 since you have given him authority over all people,[a] to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. 3 And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 4 I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. 5 So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

6 "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8 for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. 9 I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

In behalf of the Officers of the Church and the council of Bishops, let extend to you the grace and peace of God as we celebrate this coming Monday, May 25, 2020 our Church's 72 years of unity and of doing God's ministry here on earth. We are celebrating this anniversary in a time of a pandemic. We are in a situation where everyone is encouraged to stay home to protect ourselves from this deadly virus. This pandemic has challenged the ways of which our community of faith was taught to live out. That we are to gather for fellowship together, chit chat or share coffee with one another before or after our services. That as a faith community we welcome each other as sisters and brothers with a handshake or an embrace or a kiss, that we come to this fellowship to be in one table to share the Lord's Supper or share a pew with friends, relatives or with people we have just met. Clearly this pandemic has challenged us to thinking of a "new normal" for our coming together for fellowship every Sunday or in other services we are accustomed to.

What can this "new normal" be? You see two or maybe a year ago, when someone enters a bank to withdraw money and wear a mask, these people will be suspected to be doing something bad. Today, you cannot enter the bank without a mask, in fact you will get arrested if you will not wear one. Is this the "new normal"? What then is the "new normal" as far as our community of faith is concerned? Maybe in the "new normal," our Local Churches we will be discouraged to converse to each other before or after the worship for fear of transmitting the virus. Gone are the coffee times or the potluck lunches. And that choirs that used to be uplifting our spirits when singing the anthems are now

discouraged in favour of solo or ensembles with a distance during our services. During the last 8 or so Sundays our Local Churches were more creative in doing worship services either virtually or in the homes. I think maybe that will be the “new normal”. We celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper separately as a community when ironically this sacrament is also known as “Communion” that will supposedly bring us together to one table with Jesus as our host. We may struggle to find our way in this “new normal” as a community of faith, however celebrating our unity as a Church and God’s goodness and faithfulness to our Church is a celebration we are not going to miss.

Using the Lectionary Gospel Reading this Sunday, let me invite you and let us discern God’s message for us today. This story in John’s Gospel is part of what scholars thought of Jesus’ farewell discourses. These are conversations between the departing Teacher and his anxious students. They are the future of the church, and as such, Jesus speaks to them not as individuals, but as the church. They are also an embattled and uncertain little church, in need of reassurance and promises and yet, in need of a challenge, too. This church is the community of faith that is not timebound or limited to one little group of disciples: it includes all those generations, John’s community and ours as well, who are listening this conversation. Jesus ended these conversations with a Farewell Prayer in which he directs his speech not to the disciples, but to God. There are three themes in John’s Gospel that are present here in this story and that I would like us also be our themes in our celebration this year and that is: Knowledge of God; glorification and Unity.

Knowledge of God here means being in relationship with God and Christ, this is what John calls “knowing” and in this story it is available to the disciples in its entirety now. Jesus prayed: “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you...” (Ch.17:6-7). In his Gospel, John presents four great examples of discipleship. The Samaritan Woman by the well in chapter 4, the man born blind in chapter 9, Mary who poured costly perfume in chapter 12, and Thomas, of all people, in chapter 20. What do they have in common? They participated in ongoing relationship and encounter with Jesus.

Both the Samaritan woman and the blind guy have lengthy, increasingly deep dialogue with Jesus and as they do, they understand him more and more to the point where they “know” him and understand that he is the source of their lives and loves them like no other. This leads them to worship him and testify to others about him. Mary is described as one whom Jesus loved together with Martha and Lazarus (Ch.11:5), John makes it clear that they regularly spent time with Jesus. Thomas may be a less obvious hero, but he is a hero nonetheless in this Gospel. He sticks with Jesus even though he discerns trouble is in store (Ch.11:16); he asks questions when he does not understand (14:5); he is not easily persuaded to believe or prone to flights of fancy but he is willing to believe when confronted with raw glory (Ch. 20:27). On the basis of all of this, Thomas comes to fully know Jesus such that he declares him to be “My Lord and My God” (20:28).

What deeper desire exists than to know and be truly known, understand and be truly understood, love and be truly loved? According to John, that is the meaning of life. This Gospel specializes in knowing language and loving language, because they go together, though it might be contradictory to us. Because our minds may assume the opposite, in fact--we take great pains to disallow true knowledge of ourselves since we assume that the more someone knows the "real" us, the less love they will have for us. John will not countenance such notions. One cannot deeply love that which one does not know. And knowing depends upon authentic relationship and regular encounter with the beloved.

Moving forward as a Church, our challenge is to move closer in our relationship with our God in Jesus Christ and in our relationship together as a community. This will assure us that we are not left alone; we are not orphans; we are "Easter people." As Richard Burrige writes that: "A church full of 'Easter people' will be a place where grieving or searching souls can be comforted, encouraged, and strengthened" because they sense God's presence and God's Spirit in our midst, inspiring and sustaining the life we share together, nourished for ministry in the world God loves (The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels).

John's notion of God's glory is informed by the Old Testament which speaks much about the glory of the Lord. As in many other places in John, Exodus looms large in the author's imagination. "Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." (Ex.40:35). Here is the point: the glory of the Lord is God's presence. With every word that they can muster, the author of John pushes to intimacy. The incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection, glory and love all declares that God created this world, for the single purpose of unity with all of creation. As our Statement of Faith declares: "Persons are created in the image of God and destined to live in community with God, with other persons and with all creation". Intimacy and unity, Jesus came to reveal that as God's sole intention, to model that unity, to complete that unity. Jesus glorified God by completing the works God sent him to do.

The prayer in John is in contrast to Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, as Mark tells the story of this same "last" night in his Gospel. The "grieved" Jesus, who would not mind "passing" on the cup he was about to drink, with the Jesus who sits at table speaking of glory that he shared with God the Father from the beginning of time. That is because John is putting this prayer in the context not just of impending death but of the bigger picture of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, with plenty of glory for the little faith community to tap into. This prayer comes out of a very special and specific moment in the story of Jesus and what he is about, God's plan, and that includes "willingly laying down his life".

The baton gets passed in the same way, of course, from Jesus to believers who expected to do greater works than Him. Believers glorify God when they reveal God's love to the world God created and so loved (3:16), even as that world shows resistance here and there or even hatred. No matter what; the job is done, Jesus has conquered the world (16:33).

In unity the community of the disciples will be strong and not broken. Jesus' prayer was an assurance to this small community of believers as they start to pursue the work Jesus entrusted now to them. This prayer assures them and us today that we are not left with the best of human possibilities, but with the very reality of God. The believers are unified with God, Christ, the Spirit and with one another. Therefore, we are strong and equipped to do greater works than Jesus. The words we are hearing often today in the midst of our being quarantined are: "We are in this Together", and we are "Stronger Together" or "We heal as One." The Gospel of John tells us that the disciples then and us today are assured that even without Jesus physically being with them and us today, they/we can confront the complexities of human existence with the help of the gift of the reality of God.

There is no reason we cannot just as effectively demonstrate and reveal God's love for everything in God's cosmos as Jesus did. This is an empowering word, to be sure; it is also a challenging word because we cannot pretend to be waiting for something God has yet to provide before we get on with the work at hand. To be sure, the road will be rough enough that Jesus feels the need to offer prayers for our protection as we go; we know, then, that we are in good hands. We have all we need to testify to God's love in ways that will bring abundant, eternal life to all of creation.

This is more than individual acts and momentary flights of spirituality—it is an "extraordinary" way of life that follows the way of Jesus. If we live and love as Jesus did we will do so with clear consciences, with gentleness and reverence. The love that comes to us through the Spirit will overflow into the lives of others. We will be agents of God's love in the world. Indeed, those we encounter will sense that the Spirit animates our individual and our collective lives or as the popular song goes: "They'll know we are Christians by our love".

Closing

As I said earlier, we are uniquely celebrating our Church's anniversary not as a gathered community. How are we a people when we cannot gather? At the center of the present global pandemic, of course, is the suffering of those who are most severely ill, the suffering of those who are dying who are separated from the comfort of their families, and of those who care for them that oftentimes without adequate protection, rest, compensation or support. Those who are suffering from other illnesses, including mental illness exacerbated by loneliness and anxiety; those who cannot even hold funerals for their loved ones, let alone be with them at the end; in one way or another, we are sharing in an extraordinarily painful and challenging experience. And then there are those grievously affected by the economic toll: those who have lost their income, their security, their homes because of the recent typhoon.

One of the concentric circles around that core of suffering is the harm done to our ability to gather, to be together, literally, to congregate as one would expect congregations to do. The need to quarantine and self-isolate and "social-distance" by life-saving necessity

overrides our natural, human need and desire to come together, even though we are social beings by nature.

As a Church, we have the tie that binds our Church brought about by our fore-parents of our faith 72 years ago. The faith that challenges us to know more about God and God's work of salvation in the world. And that knowledge of God that can bring us together in a united effort of doing God's ministry of loving God with all our being and serving God's people.

As our VMG states our life purposes declared:

We, the members of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, affirming our common faith heritage and mission mandate, centered and founded in the Living Christ, cognizant of our diverse historical traditions and experiences, but sensitive to the problems and challenges of the contemporary society where we are located, do commit ourselves to the pursuit of the following life purposes:

- + to be a caring, sharing faith community learning and living out Jesus' example as a servant-prophet to the people,
- + to transform our life-work as a church towards becoming a more effective witness to the church's vision
- + to be a faithful proclaimer of the gospel of Shalom to and with the people
- + to work in solidarity with all other sectors and groups in society, and with other faith communities who share with UCCP's vision of society
- + to continue to work for unity and reconciliation among our own people

We intend to live out these life purposes drawing strength from the resources of our faith heritage, from the edifying traditions and lessons of our history as a church, from the stories of faith, hope and struggle of the Filipino people including the martyrs, and from the empowerment that can only come from the Holy Spirit.

Bishop Melzar D. Labuntog

UCCP Anniversary Message 2020