

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Bethany Ulrich

May 16, 2021

An impending loss or separation from our loved ones can make us do and say unusual things. Things we wouldn't do or say otherwise.

You see Jesus is with his disciples and he knows he will soon be separated from them. He has just washed their feet, he has just left them with urgent parting instructions and a new commandment to love one another. Jesus knows his time on earth is coming to an end, that the end of his time with his beloved community is just hours away.

He knows they'll no longer have him for guidance, go to him with their burning questions, or simply draw strength from being in his presence.

And not only will he not be there, but he knows the circumstances of his death will drive a wedge between some of his followers. And He knows they will face persecution and difficulty - he knows that Judas will betray him and that Peter will deny him.

He knows time is running out on this moment in time that they've had together, to be together, grow together, become a beloved community together. And he knows that great grief lies ahead for him and his loved ones.

On Palm/Passion Sunday I heard the news that three of my family members had tested positive for COVID and in that moment, the potential reality of *permanent* separation with a loved one- hit me hard.

I'm guessing many of you too have most likely experienced some kind separation during the past 14 months of pandemic.

During this time of pandemic, we've been physically distanced from loved ones- unable to form community like we once did. This separation has caused friendships to fall to the wayside, we've had holidays that we couldn't spend with family, and we've had rites of passages like baptisms, marriages, and graduations to be put on hold or to look very different.

We've also had to face *permanent* separation from loved ones whose lives have been claimed by the virus....Three million lives lost... and in just the past ten days 40,000 lives have been lost in India alone. And while the rate of vaccinations are increasing (in some parts of the world!), that doesn't change the fact that we have lost so much and it doesn't take away the lingering grief or separation that remains.

We know all too well that *desperation* of Jesus that drove him on his knees to pray to God in front of his friends. We know all too well the *pain of saying goodbye* to loved ones, of being separated from loved ones. We know all too well what it is like to live in the midst of uncertainty- to worry for ourselves as well as our loved ones.

Grief, loss, separation- these things that we've all experienced drive us into the arms of God in striking ways.

And what does Jesus do? Jesus prays.

In today's gospel passage, we get to eavesdrop on Jesus' prayer to God. This isn't quite the neat and tidy Lord's Prayer that we find in Luke and Matthew, but today's gospel holds a prayer of Jesus all the same. It is known as "the high priestly prayer" and unlike the Lord's Prayer that is a concise 11 lines used to teach his disciples how to pray, THIS ONE kind of rambles and goes in circles and is a little hard to follow. Honestly my prayers often sound more like this one...It is utterly heartfelt. It feels less like a Sunday school lesson and more like a personal cry to God in the midst of anguish, in the midst of the pending separation from his disciples.

Jesus cries out to God with his final wishes for those he loves the most. UNIFY them - Make them one as we are one- he cries. Complete their joy, he asks. May the struggle they are to face not diminish the joy they have in me. *Protect* them, he pleads. Sustain them in the midst of all trouble. And sanctify them in truth- or may they live out their holy and special role in the world. He prays all these things as he imagines their lives without him there with him.

This act of praying. Of pausing. And speaking to God- shows what it means to be connected to God even in the midst of painful separations around us. It reminds us of last week's gospel text when Jesus urged his disciples to abide in his agape

love as he abides in God's agape love. And the week before that when Jesus said "you are the vine, I am the branches" and urges unity.

Jesus praying, reminds us what it means to be one with God and with God's family in love.

When I got the news about my family with COVID, I too found myself on my knees praying to God. All the time. And praying with a fervor and an urgency that I haven't in a long time. I prayed not as someone who was going to leave others (like Jesus), but who could be left by someone's life cut too short by COVID.

This permanent separation of death causes a pain so unbearable, a pain that cuts so deep, that prayer and praying together with others was the only thing to console us even just a little bit.

As I've said before this Easter Season, the joy of resurrection- for ME at least- doesn't always look like I think it will- the confetti and Easter lilies aren't there to point me to it. There isn't music or lights playing in the background. It doesn't always feel shocking or overwhelming like you think that resurrection or new life should.

Actually, ironically, sometimes the joy of resurrection comes *in the midst* of heartbreak and *in the presence* of things like separation and death.

Sometimes new life or renewed life can be found when praying to God out of grief...spilling our heart, crying all our tears out...telling God exactly what we

think--- whether we are angry, grief stricken, confused, tortured, or even doubting. When we come as ourselves to the presence of God in prayer.

Sometimes glimpses of new life can look like going through the hardest weeks of your life and you wonder how you were able to get through it all - and it's only when you take a moment in prayer to pause and look back- that you realize it was God who protected...who sustained you all along.

And sometimes we experience resurrection in the love that pulses through our veins for our loved ones as we pray, in those moments of urgency and of crisis, in those moments of imagining or experiencing separation from them. Because in those moments, the love that Jesus had for his beloved pulses through our hearts, and the love that motivated Christ's prayer to God, motivates us.

Dear friends, wherever you find yourselves today, this seventh Sunday of Easter, millionth Sunday of the pandemic (or that's what it feels like anyways) and millionth day of separation from loved ones - may you know resurrection as you bring all your grief and pain and all that you carry to God. May you know the joy of Christ as you reflect on all the ways that he has sustained you and gotten you this far. And may the promise of new life *already given to you*, indeed become oh so very real.

Amen.