

Easter 7B
Peace, Seattle
May 17, 2015
John 17:6-19

RUSTY TOOLS

The feeling was always the same: As I took my place for the 4x100 relay, anticipating the starter's gun, the butterflies would always come. Those moments I stood there were always the worst.

In an instant I would be speeding around the oval, heart pumping, lungs heaving, legs churning. But for that moment all I could do was wait... and hope that when the time came, the butterflies would vanish; and that I would receive the baton without a hitch; that I would fly like the wind; that our team would be the first to cross the line.

It's this kind of on your tiptoes waiting that characterizes, for me, these final weeks before Pentecost; this final interval before the promised Spirit unfurls its wings and soars with God's disciple community on its back out into the world.

Today as we wait for the starter's gun, we become eavesdroppers. Today we take in all that Jesus prays to the Father on our behalf and we try to sort out what it all means.

It's an odd kind of section from the gospel, this 17th chapter.

Chapter 14 ends with the words: RISE, LET US BE ON OUR WAY, and then, inexplicably, we get three more chapters of teaching from the mouth of Jesus.

It's almost as if Jesus had a false start, and discovered he had a number of additional things he wanted to share, a last lecture of sorts, before he left his disciples to carry on his mission in the world. So he and the 12 take their places again, and the teaching continues.

Chapter 15: The image of Vine and Branches

Chapter 16: The promise of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth

And Chapter 17: Jesus' prayer on behalf of his followers; and, as we're meant to understand, on behalf of us, too.

I remember the cross-country journey I took with my son Nathan, to him off at College; and driving my daughter Megan down to California Lutheran for the start of her freshman year.

After all the bags are put away, the boxes are unpacked, the room is set up; after you've met the roommate and the roommate's parents and have attended the parents' meeting and it's time to go, it hits you—what is there to say that I haven't already said—or tried to?

You realize that your opportunity to teach and shape your son, your daughter, is largely in the past now. Any thing you could say you've already said—time and time again.

More words seem useless at times like that. All you can do is embrace them and tell them you love them. All you can do—and it's no little thing—is pray.

That, in part, is what's going on in our gospel today.

So what does Jesus have to say in his prayer?

He asks God for four things on behalf of his followers:

- That we may be protected from evil;
- That we may be one as he and the Father are one;
- That we may have his joy;
- That we may be made holy in the truth.

Underneath it all, the entire section is undergirded with a plea that the disciples' faith—that our faith—would abide.

Not faith as a series of belief statements, not faith in the form of a creed, not faith as an object we can possess; but faith as a living relationship, a connectedness, a participation in the life of the True Vine.

Bob Wightman and I attended the synod assembly on Friday and Saturday.

The theme for this year's assembly was a question, CAN WE TALK?

We were invited to consider and to try out ways of talking with and listening to each other that allow us to increase our connection to each other.

The invitation was to practice ways of engaging with one another over the questions, concerns, and challenges that are important to us, rather than avoiding them. It's an art our world sorely needs.

One of our presenters cited the recent PEW RESEARCH report on religion in America that documents an increasingly rapid rise in the number of Americans who claim no faith affiliation whatsoever. The percentage of "NONES," as they're called, is growing in all regions and among all ages, races, genders, and demographics.

What are we to do in the face of this rising secularism?

Bishop Unti told us that nostalgia is not the answer. We cannot chart the course for the church's future by looking in the rearview mirror. And Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton reminded us that as vital and important as our actions for the sake of the neighbor are, the church is called to be more than a service organization with sacraments.

Jesus, in his prayer for us in today's gospel, speaks clearly about where we belong:

I AM NOT ASKING YOU TO TAKE THEM OUT OF THE WORLD, he prays, BUT I ASK YOU TO PROTECT THEM FROM THE EVIL ONE. AS YOU HAVE SENT ME INTO THE WORLD, SO I HAVE SENT THEM INTO THE WORLD.

The world, in John's gospel, is that realm that consistently hates life, chooses death, and lies. Yet God in Christ does not abandon this world, but calls us and sends us into this world—a world which, in spite of all its failures, God so loves.

This is where we belong—in a world where ISIS threatens, and Israelis and Palestinians struggle still to recognize one another's right to exist.

A world where people with evil intent do devilish deeds in the name of religion.

A world where kayaks and drilling rigs clash. A world where earth's growing fragility demands that we take notice and take action.

Yes, this is the world into which we are sent.

His breath fills our lungs, his heart beats in our chests, his love, integrated in our neurons and transmitted through our muscles, bears us into the world.

As you come to the Table this morning, and take Jesus in once more, incorporating his body his blood into your own, know that you are being fed and equipped to be his body in the world; that you are, in the words of Brother Martin called us “God’s rusty tools.”

Not perfectly polished stainless steel versions; not perfectly serviceable or perfectly calibrated purveyors of the love of God, but rusty tools.

And yet, we are tools! Tools chosen by God to do God’s work, tools which, whatever their limitations, can still, through the power of God’s Spirit working within us, get the job done.

Let us pray:

God, who so loved the world that you sent your Son Jesus to show us the way; use us, rusty tools that we are, to tell and show the world what love is. Use us through the power of your Holy Spirit to speak and act in ways that kindle hope and shine your saving light for all to see. Protect us from all that would lead us away from your kingdom’s goals, and enable us to stand firm in your love, knowing that we are forever yours. In Jesus’ name. Amen.