

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – August 8, 2021 – Sent
John 17:20-26**

Throughout John's gospel, we are privy to Jesus' innermost thoughts and prayers. And as the narrative progresses, we find him on the verge of fully realizing his purpose. Enveloped in self-giving love, the time is swiftly approaching when he will willingly lay down his life for the sake of the world.

As a minister, I do my best to care for other people. I pray for them. I draw alongside them and encourage them. I teach, preach, and serve. But my reach is limited. And even in my earnest desire to be of assistance, I don't always get it right. I am human. I fall short. And I, too, am in need of prayer.

Today's lesson makes a truly remarkable claim. This text tells us that Jesus cares so intimately about each of us that he prays for us by name, interceding on behalf of humankind before the Father of all creation. None are overlooked and none are forgotten.

Stated differently, the message here is deeply incarnational. For just as Jesus is one with the Father, he longs to be in unity with us. With you and with me. This

is why he appeared to us in human form, and why he ministered in a body much like our own.

Through the example of his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, Jesus offers a visible demonstration of who God is – ever-present, purposefully engaged, and completely committed to the plight of humankind and of all of creation. In the same manner, he bears witness to who and what God is not, by putting to rest any notion that the One who sent him is emotionally distant, or physically aloof, or perpetually pre-occupied. From the beginning, Jesus points the way to the One who draws near.

Today, we have much to celebrate as we welcome Pierce, Kinsie, Gabby, Sam, and Holden into full membership in the life of our church. For years, we have claimed them as our own. Each of these students is personally known to us. They have been adopted into the household of faith through the waters of baptism. They have regularly participated in the programming of this congregation. And, from the earliest of ages, they have been instructed here in the ways of Jesus.

On account of the present pandemic, the curriculum for this year's confirmation class was presented 100% online. And in the midst of these unusual circumstances, our students pushed through. They persevered in spite of the disconnected, distracting, and isolating nature of online learning. And in doing so,

they became the first and, perhaps, even the last gathering of confirmands in the history of Westminster to be received into membership in this way.

Today, these students have affirmed for themselves what they believe and who they wish to be, and they have chosen to embrace the lifelong call to discipleship. As Christ's beloved disciples, they have stated their intention to be one with God and one with us. And they have claimed as their own the body of believers and the unity of the faith, which spans all times and places.

Still, we know, just as they do, that this is just one moment. And that the journey ahead will oftentimes put them at odds with rapidly shifting cultural norms. As followers of Jesus, they will frequently encounter others who do not claim a Christian identity or attend religious services, who do not read the Bible or even believe in the existence of God. And in the absence of this shared, theological language, the starting point for conversation will often not be faith, but skepticism, not belief, but doubt.

The reality of these trends present us with a challenge. But, they also pose an opportunity. For amid the doubts and skepticism of our friends, and neighbors, and families, we have the ability to provide an accounting of our faith. To testify to the

truth revealed in Christ. To explain why it is that we persist in our devotion, and remain steadfast in prayer, and persevere in hope, even when the results are not readily visible.

And in a world which demands that everything – everything – ought to happen right now, we offer a liberating alternative. Freedom from constant anxiety through patient trust in the divine will. This is the good news of peace at last that so many desperately long to hear, built on the foundation of personal connection.

You see, it is in relationship that our gifts are affirmed and we are challenged to rise above our weaknesses. It is in relationship that we are made vulnerable and exposed to the depths of divine love made known to us in the gospels. And it is in relationship that we discover the intrinsic value that God bestows upon every human life. Relationship is the cornerstone of our discipleship.

Aldous Huxley once wrote, “We can only love what we know, and we can never know completely what we do not love. Love is a mode of knowledge.”¹ Friends, if Huxley is correct, then his insight helps us to better understand the unsettling nature of the current pandemic. For unlike crises of previous generations,

¹ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, (Harper & Brothers, 1945).

which often served as a catalyst to bring folks back to the comfort of the church, the present struggle in which we find ourselves has regularly turned neighbor against neighbor, as we quarrel with one another over vaccinations and social distancing, over masks and the proper protocols for gathering together.

For more than a year, Covid-19 has disrupted our community, and threatened to break the bonds between us. So it is all the more remarkable that we have just welcomed five new members into the life of our church. And as we claim them as co-workers in Christ, it is exciting to see how God is at work within them. Guiding them. Leading them. Encouraging them. Praying for them. Sending them. God is crafting opportunities for their growth, honing their gifts, and providing them with the right mentors in order that they might continue to develop in the faith.

Each of our new members is smart, talented, energetic, and capable. And while it is certainly true that they represent the future of the church, they also represent so much more than that. Because these students are already deeply engaged in the work of ministry. They are regularly called upon to collect, and prepare, and serve food to the needy. They have volunteered their time to assist in our Memorial Garden and at the home of a neighbor who was not physically able to do the work herself. They are studying scripture, thinking theologically, and engaging in

worship. So we need not act as if their discipleship will begin at some future date. Because, in reality, these students already represent the work of Jesus Christ in the church universal, and they are already living the faith.

Soon, we will turn our hearts and minds to the table of forgiveness, and together receive signs of God's gracious love. Bread for the journey. Enough for all. Then, nourished for the work ahead, we will be sent by the God who draws near. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.