

### **John 17:1-11 (NRSV)**

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, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

"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; 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. 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. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 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.

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Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

I get a special thrill when the issue of the Recorder comes out that lists the middle and high school students who have achieved honors and high honors, and I'm spoiled, I guess, that we usually have more than a few students on those lists. This year, those achievements made me see today's texts in a new way.

Today's Gospel text has been known as the "high priestly prayer" since the Middle Ages. It is, in a way, the culmination of Jesus' ministry on earth in the Gospel of John. Jesus says it on his last night on earth, and in some places in the prayer it seems that he is already gone – "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world," he says. The next day will bring crucifixion and death. This may be John's version of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, but the emotional tone is very different. Jesus is not afraid or agitated. He is calm and assured. He asks for the Father's protection of the faithful. He has protected them while he has been here but now he is leaving. This is a crucial moment in John's Gospel.

The text from Acts for this week honors Ascension Day. In it, Jesus, who has returned to teach for a time is now about to leave again. He assures the faithful that they will have the power of the spirit and that they will be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth." And then he is lifted up and a cloud takes him out of their sight. This is another crucial moment, this time in the life of the church.

And here is the punch-line. Two angels appear and ask the disciples, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? There's work to be done here on earth. Kathy Dangin gave me a book a couple weeks ago. It tells the story of a fellow – his name is John Wood -- who leaves a secure position at Microsoft to begin building schools and libraries in the less developed world. As it turns out John Wood is not exactly a religious man – he is doing this because even though his work at Microsoft was exciting and financially rewarding, he wanted to make a difference in the world. While on vacation in Nepal, he meets a man who invites him to visit their school. When John Wood comes to this school, he meets a group of children who have no books. The man says that the school's

books were locked away so that the children wouldn't damage them. When they bring the books out they turn out to be a romance by Danielle Steele, a thick book by Umberto Eco in Italian, *The Lonely Planet Guide to Mongolia*, and a copy of *Finnegan's Wake* by James Joyce.

I suppose this man might have been an angel who was saying to John, "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" You have within you everything you need to make an enormous difference to these children. You have the organizational skills, you have the knowledge, you have the talent. And the man -- the angel? -- was right. John Wood didn't have the resources in himself -- that is, he didn't have the books, or the way to ship them or enough money to do it himself. But he did have the organizational skills and the talent and conviction to get people to give him the money and the books that these children needed. And so was born his brainchild, "Room to Read," a nonprofit organization that has built more than 300 schools, established more than 4,000 libraries in the developing world, donated more than 2 million English language books, 125 computer and language labs and scholarships for more than 4,000 young women.

The reading today from Ephesians is the only real job description given for pastors -- that they should equip the saints for the work of ministry. A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Wendy and I were talking about what it means to "equip the saints." The things we've been talking about here today seem to help in thinking through an answer.

Encouraging our children to read and study, and reading and studying ourselves is one thing. I mean Bible study, of course, but also study of history and biography and the humanities, because a person who is broadly educated is a person who can understand other people's lives, lives of people they haven't met. A person who is broadly educated can identify the systemic problems that

keep people from becoming the people God wants them to be. A person who is broadly educated is a person who is open to the new realities of the Gospel, open to the Good News of God at work in the world. That's why I'm so proud of our young people who achieve academic honors – if they've also been educated in Christian values and touched by the Spirit, they can be God's skillful hands in the world working for good. So, one aspect of equipping the saints is encouraging them to be broadly and excellently educated.

But as I read the story of John Wood, I see another aspect that we don't usually think of as equipping the saints. John has wonderful organizational skills, skills that can be learned and taught. He set clear and ambitious goals and a positive vision, he figured out ways to set people free to participate in exciting new ventures, he measured everything that was important to the success of the organization, he was relentlessly positive. In short, he made it possible for people to succeed in work that was worth doing.

Now, for some reason, Christians, and particularly Protestant Christians, don't generally think of organizational skills as a kind of spiritual gift. It may be because the Protestant impulse was to rebel against the church of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to reform the church, to be suspicious of the religious establishment. And that was certainly a valid concern.

But there are Godly ways of organizing, ways of helping the Spirit to work with clarity and charity. As I look at the work that we do at Saint Nicholas, we have a solid group of ministry sponsors who drive the work of ministry here. We have a Congregation Council that understands its role, doesn't micromanage but does set clear directions. And increasingly, we have young people who offer their energy and their gifts in ministry and in the process, learn a little bit about organizing in a Godly way. We have had youth leaders of Cupid's Café for the

past two years, this year we have a youth leader for Vacation Bible School and each time we pair a youth leader with an adult so that we can teach and instruct at the same time that we get the work done and have fun doing it.

Next Sunday we will be confirming a new group of adult members of the church and I'm very proud of them. I think nearly all of them are also on the honor roll and for that I credit their parents. They have learned about the Bible and the creeds, to be sure. They have also learned about how Saint Nicholas works, about our history here. They have learned about the larger church doing God's work in the world. They have learned about how we are organized and in time they will learn Godly ways of organizing the work of the Kingdom, and they will take their places as God's competent and effective disciples here on earth.

You see, equipping the saints for a complex and sophisticated world in order for them to be "*in* the world, but not *of* the world" is not a simple task and helping to build the Kingdom requires not just a good heart, but skills and knowledge and talent. It requires skills in Godly thought and speech, Godly decisions and actions and Godly ways of organizing the saints. To be sure, the Spirit moves and inspires us, but more is required than simply looking up to heaven. Disciples are learners, first and foremost. To be his witnesses to the ends of the earth asks of us everything we have to give, including hearts and hands *and minds*. May God be praised!

Amen.