

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter: John 17:6-19  
The Rev. Brooks Cato

Well, I gotta say, that Gospel reading makes it real tempting to imagine myself as the Messiah. I'm not, by the way, I know that. I'm not Jesus, and I'm definitely not picturing myself in his shoes. Buuuuuut, this scene where Jesus prays for his disciples as he prepares to leave them, I mean, you can see it right? I'm not Jesus. I don't want to be Jesus. I don't want you to think I'm Jesus, and I don't want you to think I think I'm Jesus. But this farewell discourse just might be a sort of mirror. So, let's start with what's different. We already covered that I'm not Jesus. All agreed? Good. I'm also not about to get arrested (I don't think), not about to spend a terrible night fretting about y'all and myself, not about to be brought before the governor and ultimately crucified. And even if I was, I'm not about to rise again in three days. Y'all aren't disciples. At least, you're not my disciples. You are disciples of the Good Shepherd. At my best, I'm just a sheepdog. None of y'all are about to chop off anyone's ear, at least I don't think you are. And none of y'all think I'm on the road to an awful death for treason against the empire. Also, none of y'all think I'm the Son of God, which is a good thing, 'cause again I'm not. I will be laying my head to rest for the big sleep soon, and by that I don't mean the grave, I just mean I'm planning on sleeping for the next three days straight, after which I just might rise again for a snack and go back to bed. And while I'm sleeping off the past 8 years, y'all won't be hiding behind locked doors for fear of whatever the world holds. You won't need proof that I am I. I won't walk through walls proclaiming "shalom!" and show you old scars. I might share a fish fry with ya, but not before August. And I just might find myself on higher ground, but I won't ascend there with Holy Spirit-powered rocket boosters.

But, there is something I want to point out that does track from that Gospel to us today. While Jesus prepares to leave this world, he prays for the safety and well-being of his people. And I'll tell ya, if there's one thing that's remotely Jesus-like to this fella in your pulpit, it's that I'm praying for y'all, for your safety and your well-being. I'll be back soon enough, but that won't stop my prayers just 'cause we see each other a bit more often. If there's anything I can claim in myself that is Christ-like it's just that: I hold you in my prayers. And I hope you hold me in yours. You're gonna be just fine this Summer, I know, but think of all those prayers as a sort of sacred insurance plan. Y'all are gonna be just fine, but just in case, here's a prayer or two.

Actually, I wonder about the next week or two in particular. Next Sunday, the story picks up where today's Collect hints, with the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide God's people now that Jesus has come and gone and come back and gone again. "Send us your Holy Spirit," we prayed right off the bat. And that, that right there's where our lives, my life, intersects beautifully with scripture. I'm no Jesus, y'all know that. We've been running this race together for plenty long enough for you to be well sure of that fact. But I do care for you deeply, and come tomorrow morning, I trust the Holy Spirit to guide this whole church for the next few months. And I trust y'all to hear it, listen, live, and thrive under its care. The cool thing is, though, that Spirit's no stranger. Back at my Installation, we sang "There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit In This Place." That's not just y'all, and that's no accident. It takes a church that listens to the fierce and fiery blowing of the Holy Spirit to live that out. And my God, do y'all live that out. That Spirit's been here. You know it well. That Spirit's here right now. You can hear it a little bit louder, a little bit clearer in this incredible music. But it's here on calmer days, too. It's comfort and solace, joy and silence, excitement and peace. That Spirit's a regular attendee, and ever since the 7th day of Creation, it hasn't taken a day off, either. It'll be here all summer long. And once I get back, it'll keep on sticking around. The constant in this place isn't me or you or even these buildings or prayer books or hymn boards. The constant in this place is God. You'll notice my sabbatical takes me away before Trinity Sunday. I swear I didn't plan it that way, but I'm not gonna say I'm sad to miss preaching that day. Canon Megan will do a fine job, finer than I could've that's for sure. But I will say this about the Trinity: Spirit, Son,

and Father, I don't really care all that much how you describe them / it, but I do care that you recognize them / it here. That mysterious 3-in-1 will sustain you today, tomorrow, and for the rest of time, be it summer, winter, sabbatical, overtime, napping, working, or just plain being. The constant is God.

But, there's one little bit from that Gospel I want to touch on before I pack up my work gloves and set to stacking stones in the far and distant land of Vermont. Jesus says he does not belong to this world and neither do his people. I'm sure you've all heard this before, but I've got a quick caveat for you. Where I'm from, some take this passage to mean that this world has grown so broken and distant from its intended design as to be completely secularized (at best) and perhaps even damned (at worst). And if it's damned, then it must be disposable. By that logic, the cares of this world mean nothing to us. Some even take it a step further and claim the disposal of this world's a necessary step in the coming salvation. And when that becomes our guiding interpretation, being "not of this world" allows us to ignore this world. The argument's basically the same as looking across the street and seeing your neighbor's house engulfed in flames. But it's not your house, so why bother calling 911? I wish this was just a caricature. I wish I could say no one thinks like that. I wish we could laugh at the absurdity and thank God our world's different. But y'all know better. Being "not of this world" does not mean we don't care for the world or for its people. It does mean we don't find our satisfaction in the things this world says we should, namely power and money and the many abuses that come with seeking them out. In other words, when we see our neighbor's house on fire, we call 911. And we don't do it because we expect a small town hero's parade or a kickback from their homoeowner's insurance. We do it because it's the right thing to do. We aren't motivated by power or money. We're motivated by love and a desperate concern for their well-being.

Y'all, our neighbors' houses are on fire. I don't mean the folks specifically on Madison Street. I'm talking about the whole world. The pursuit of power and excess has grown so great that we're teetering on the edge of destruction, and as long as there are people who can step back and pretend like they aren't affected by that spreading fire, more and more of the world'll turn to ash. Next week, you'll hear of that same Holy Spirit descending onto the heads of the disciples like flames flickering with holy light. They say it's easiest to fight fire with fire, and to push this metaphor to its breaking point, that might just be how we can exist in a burning world but not be consumed, and it just might be how we can save it. There is great beauty in this world. There's sacredness and gift and blessing. There's love and peace and room to breathe, but I fear what happens if we choose to stand back because we're "not of this world."

I guess the point of me saying all this is to encourage y'all to let that Holy Spirit light its fire under you. This coming three months is more than a time to survive. This coming three months will demand much of you. I guess if I'm in the business of leaving you homework over summer break, it's just this: save the world. No biggie. I mean, it's up to God to do the saving, but as Teresa of Avila has it, you are Christ's hands, Christ's feet, Christ's body, and maybe most importantly Christ's compassion. Grab your own naps this summer as you can. Rest. Find renewal. But keep an eye on your neighbor's house, and when the time comes, fight those flames of greed and corruption with your own sacred flames of love and peace. That's it. That's all you have to do. Nothing could be simpler, right? I'm kidding, of course. It's hard work, and sometimes it's just as hard to take a breather as it is to fight the good fight. But this is why you have this place. This is why you have each other. None of us can do this alone, so we don't. In the church's wisdom, we gather as a body and we work as a body, each with their own role. I promise you, if you do this, if you support one another, this wonderful church will stand for generations to come. And if we're lucky, our world just might, too, for God is our constant.

One last thing, and then I'll sit down. I am just so grateful for everything y'all have done for me in this amazing place. I didn't know being a priest could be this fun. I'm having a blast. And I know just how much y'all are taking on to make space for me to step back. As y'all're painfully aware, I'm rarely at a loss for words.

But when I try to tell you how much this summer means to me, my words fail. So I'll keep it simple. For eight wonderful years, for supporting my family, for putting up with barks from the back porch, for embracing my best friend, for random food left on the doorstep, for all the love and kindness and care, for book recommendations, for hard conversations, for trying new things and for breathing life into old ones, and finally, for being such a beautiful Body of Christ, St. Thomas', thank you.