



Seventh Sunday of Easter Season Sunday after the Ascension of Christ Jesus

Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner

[Acts 1:1-11](#)

[Psalm 47](#)

[Ephesians 1:15-23](#)

[John 17:6-19](#)

Good morning, dear friends. God's blessings and joys fill your hearts today. And, especially today, to all mothers and all who have given the love of a mother to anyone, God's blessings of joy, peace, strength, and love fill your hearts and minds on this Mother's Day.

Welcome to the opening of summertime here in the Inland Northwest. The saying goes, plant your gardens on Mother's Day. And, here we are with blessed warm weather, passing through the colder days of needed rain. The flowers are up. The weeds are up, in force. So, yesterday, in order to plant our garden, Heather and I spent several hours reclaiming our garden from an onslaught of dandelions and wild amaranth.

Welcome today to the last Sunday in Easter Season. He is risen! And today, we mark the day when Jesus ascended from this earth, from his friends and followers, leaving them as his legacy and giving to them the ongoing work of proclaiming God's good news.

Hear these synonyms for "ascend." To ascend means to rise, climb, soar! Jesus rose, climbed, soared into the full and close and intertwined embrace with God the Father. Jesus rose, climbed, soared – in the body, not as a disembodied divine being, but fully human while fully divine, taking our humanity into the very heart of God. Think about this, friends – our human nature is part of God's inner life, part of God, through Jesus for all eternity. Through Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Triune God knows us completely – not just from the outside as a creator but from the inside as one with us.

We proclaim this moment in Jesus' life as a core part of our faith – every Sunday, we say together that "he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

Picture with me this moment. Jesus with us, his followers that he has also called friends, on the Mount of Olives outside the city, speaking with us, leaving us with his final blessing, final instruction about what comes next, and final charge for what we will do next. And then, before our eyes together, he rises from us and is taken high from our sight.

What do we feel at this moment? What are we as Jesus' followers feeling and thinking?

"Jesus, when are you coming back? When will God set in motion the final chapter? When will your Kingdom truly be here, in all its fullness for all the world?"

Jesus anticipates these questions, and before ascending he says something like this: "That is not for you to know, those times and periods. Let me tell you what really matters. What matters is coming next for you. The Holy Spirit is coming! You will receive the Spirit's power, and you will give witness to me and to God's goodness you have seen through me – here in Jerusalem, in the rest of Judea, in neighboring Samaria, and everywhere else to the ends of the earth."

This is Jesus' final charge to us, his beloved followers who are his friends.

“But, where are you going? Will we see you again?”

Here, we turn to the passage we heard today from John’s Gospel. For this Sunday after the Ascension, we have this portion from John 17 that comes from Jesus’ final prayer of blessing over his disciples at their Passover meal together, before his betrayal and death – in John, before his being lifted high from the earth on the cross where Jesus said, “It is accomplished.” It may seem strange to have this on the last Sunday of Easter. But it is selected for us at the end of Easter season for a reason. Bear with me.

This part of John, in Jesus’ final hours with his closest followers, is where Jesus opens a picture to his followers of just how intertwined they all are – Jesus with God the Father, and each of them and all of them together with Jesus and each other.

In these chapters, we find the Gospel of John at its thickest. It is so thickly written, and layered. Everything is intertwined. Like a prayer shawl, and the array of prayer shawls we are blessing today. Each is lovingly knit together with deep care and with prayers of intention for any person it touches. If I began to dissect it and unravel it, it would no longer be a shawl. Don’t try to understand the prayer shawl, or this Gospel reading, by dissecting it. You will understand it, like you understand a prayer shawl, by wrapping it around yourself and letting it bring you its warmth and comfort.

What we heard today is part of Jesus’ legacy prayer as he faces toward his own death. Today, at the end of Easter Season, after Jesus’ ascension, we pick it up again, with a sense that this prayer continues as Jesus’ ongoing appeal for us his followers who are his friends as he rises and takes up his place in the full and undivided union of God. Imagine this with me, friends. Jesus, as he rises from us, is already making this his ongoing appeal to God, and to us.

“Friends, I am leaving you – and you are my legacy. You. I am no longer in the world as I was for these brief years. But you are in the world. Father, here they are, in the world. Protect them, make their joy complete, and, as I have sent them, sanctify them – make them holy.”

Just before this prayer, Jesus has given us a thickly intertwined picture of how we are intertwined with each other and with him, just as he and the Father are intertwined.

We are in this together. And this is his legacy – we are his legacy, and the work he has left for us is his legacy for us to carry.

So, what does it mean for you to leave a legacy? I have invited us to think over these months about legacy. Our Tuesday bible study on Paul’s letters from prison has focused in many ways on how Paul was writing at the end of his life, looking at a possible oncoming death sentence, and wanting to make sure that all the communities of faith he had helped to birth and build and nurture and strengthen would continue faithful to Christ and dedicated to the Way of Love. In each, he expresses tender affection for the people to whom he is writing, offers his guidance and counsel, and invites them to embrace and carry forward their faithful life together in the love of Christ. These are his legacy letters.

How about you? Think for a moment with me. Three questions for you:

- What will you leave as your legacy message?
- What do you want to make sure others receive and take up and carry forward that you helped to create and nurture?

- And what does it mean for you to hand off something that you have carried – and truly let it go, handing it off completely to those who come after you?

This is Jesus' legacy prayer for us. It is also known commonly as Jesus' high priestly prayer. You can picture Jesus praying this in a way like the high priests of ancient Israel would pray singularly in the Holy of Holies, before the Ark of the Covenant which was God's most central and direct dwelling place, bringing prayer for all the people along with the sacrifice made on behalf of all the people. But we could also consider this prayer as the prayer of the Lamb of God. Jesus stands for us as both priest and sacrificial lamb, the One who emptied himself for our sake and the sake of the whole world.

Just to underscore, this Jesus is so much less the Lion, and so much more the Lamb. Jesus does not pray for vindication over his death. He does not seek vengeance or strive to assemble the armies of heaven against anyone. Jesus instead continues to pour himself out for us and for all people and all creation – this is God who continues to empty God's self for us.

This, then, is Jesus' prayer for us forever on our behalf. "Make them one, as we are one. Protect them. Guide them. Fill them with my joy. I have sent them, so make them and their work holy."

This is the forever-prayer of Jesus our brother, Jesus our pattern, Jesus our forever-advocate, crying out from the heart of God to which he rose and soared.

So, in addition to leaving us a legacy, Jesus advocates for us. What then does it mean to be an advocate?

We are familiar with advocacy organizations and groups in this country. Advocacy is the practice of going to bat for other people who are in need, making a case on their behalf. This is well and good. But it is also not the whole picture we get with Christ Jesus as advocate. Jesus advocates not as one who is distant or remote, looking in and caring and wanting to lift everyone out to a higher plane of existence, but never actually living the life of those he cares about. Jesus is more truly and fully an advocate as One who has lived among those he cares about, truly and fully, experiencing all that they experience in life, who can speak from the heart of others because of having lived the path and known it from the inside. Jesus is an advocate who has experienced all the wounding and death and destruction that we do, who has experienced being raised up, who still bears the wounds even now as an integral part of the humanity that he has taken up as himself into the heart of God.

Jesus our advocate ascended and took our humanity up into the very nature of God. And Jesus, who has lived in our midst and tasted our food and felt our grime and dirt, is pleading for us. As St. Paul puts it, "Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us" (Rom. 8:34). And, at the same time, Jesus Christ is near to us. St. Paul goes on to say, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

And, as he pleads our case, Jesus takes JOY in us – we are his joy! And when joy fills and guides and flows from us, we fulfill what Jesus hopes and prays and pleads for us.

Jesus poured himself out for us – and even through this ongoing prayer of appeal for all of us, pours himself out in the very heart of God forever for our sake. There is now no condemnation, because the

One who has any right to condemn is at the heart of God appealing on our behalf and on behalf of the whole world.

Can we imagine being such an advocate for someone else? Is this what it means, at its deepest, to be a mother?

So, friends, this is how we are sent – just as Jesus was sent – but even beyond where Jesus was sent – to be witnesses to God’s love and advocates for others around us. We are sent to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost ends of the earth. For us, where we live, we are sent to our cities of Coeur d’Alene and Post Falls, this wider region of North Idaho, that space across the border of Eastern Washington and Spokane, and anywhere – anywhere – God calls us.

Will you be a witness?

Will you be an advocate?

And will you leave a legacy? What kind of legacy will you leave for others to carry forward?