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“The Lasting Legacy of Jesus” A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

May 24, 2009

Acts 1:15-17, 20-26; 1 John 4:11-16; John 17:11-19

Tell me what you pray for, and I will tell you who you are and what kind of legacy you are most likely to leave to succeeding generations.

The story in today’s gospel occupies a dramatic moment, as Jesus turns to his Father in prayer on the eve of his death. Imagine, if we were able to eavesdrop on what Jesus said to his Father in that most intimate moment, as he faced—perhaps as never before--his human mortality! John invites us to do just that—to listen in on the prayer of Jesus and on his farewell address to his closest followers.

As a pastor I have been privileged to hear the last words of those who have died and so often men and women seek not only consolation but also the conviction to trust the future with confidence. Most do not make death bed speeches but they do ache to make things right, to seek wholeness and unity in their relationships, to forgive and to let go. Sometimes there is unfinished business that they want to deal with since there is no time left to do so.

Ancient writers had a favorite device they frequently used to capture the essence of a heroic figure and the meaning of his life. They would compose a “deathbed farewell speech” that summed up what was most important about the person’s life and the legacy he left behind. This sort of literary technique is still used today. You may have seen it in the Benjamin Button movie, where the dying mother of Caroline says about her father, Benjamin, “All I have to give you is my story.” Or you may remember “the call to arms” by William Wallace before battle in **Braveheart**: “Many of you will die today but you will die as free men of Scotland.”

Such final words are meant to be a defining moment that lets heroic figures distill the meaning of their lives in the last whispers of their life.

In the great “Last Discourse” of Jesus in John’s Gospel, the author has created just such a moment: Jesus summarizes the meaning of his hopes for those who are his disciples in a moving prayer to his Father. We are drawn into this intimate setting, and we are able to

hear for ourselves Jesus' prayer to his Father—a prayer about the lasting legacy he wishes to pass on to us.

It is an encouraging and deeply touching word that captures His hopes for us and that outlines our mission for future generations.

What is closest to Jesus' heart in this prayer?
What is the legacy he leaves behind for us?

Two themes emerge as priorities in the prayer of Jesus—unity and mission.

In parting, he bequeaths a gift that John's Gospel captures in the profoundly simple, memorable words: "That they may be one, Father, as we are one." The intimate communion of love that Jesus has with his Father is precisely what Jesus wants his church to experience as they go about the work of fulfilling their mission in the world.

And this mission—our mission—flows directly from what Jesus prayed for on that sacred evening: We are to be reconcilers of worlds, promoters of unity, healers of the broken, protectors of the little ones, peacemakers and consecrated to the truth.

Next week on Pentecost, we will confirm our young people in the faith of their baptisms. Being sent on mission is what we have tried to inculcate in the newly confirmed. Mission is a strong theme in the readings of today. Matthias is selected by the Spirit to carry on the Mission of Jesus, to witness to the Resurrection. Our young people too are reminded again in this important stage of their lives that as the Father has sent me, so I send you.

But what does this look like as priorities in the life and ministry of our congregation?

Our mission to make God's love, truth, joy and peace credible to an incredulous world is compounded in difficulty by our own disunity as an ecumenical community of faith. It is the prayer and hope of all of us that the prayer and hope of Jesus on the night before he died might remain the highest of priorities in our prayers. Unity was not a mere side effect or by-product of Christ's mission but the very object and purpose of his being sent to us. Therefore it must never remain a secondary concern for us. But our peace, unity and communion as Christ's church:

- Is not founded on perfect and exhaustive mutual understanding
- Is not founded on perfect agreement on every conceivable religious issue
- Is not founded on identity of tastes or modes of expression

It is founded on the greatest of gifts—perfect charity which drives and impels us to make every effort of bridge every difference that divides. The prayer of Jesus reminds his followers to be one and we are all obliged to work for this unity until it is accomplished in the Spirit.