

7th Sunday of Easter, May 13, 2018

John 17:6-19

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

I'm going to tell you a story about me and my mother, but not because it's Mother's Day. I don't like to make a big deal about Mother's Day in our worship services beyond a prayer for mothers in our prayers of intercession. You can ask me about my reasons for that later. But today I need to talk about mothers (and maybe fathers too) because I think it helps to clarify our gospel reading and Jesus' concern for his disciples. So let's call it a coincidence that I find myself doing this on Mother's Day.

The story is about me learning to drive. More specifically, it's about the first time I ever got behind the wheel of a car. And it was my mother who was going to give me my first lesson. Now there are two things you need to know that set the stage for this story. The first is that we were a family of manual transmission cars when I was growing up, except for the full-sized Chevy station wagon that we got when I was in high school. But we always had at least one manual car, and my parents were insistent that that was what my sisters and I learned to drive on. For me it was a green Opel station wagon. The second thing you need to know is how confident I was about driving. Before we went anywhere near the car my mom sat me down to talk to me about all the things I need to think about before and during driving. I don't remember the details of that talk because I wasn't really paying attention. I was chomping at the bit to get in that car and drive. So finally we did. I was in the driver's seat, fulfilling my destiny. We were going to back out of the driveway into the street and then drive around the block. I adjusted the seat. Checked the mirrors. Put my foot on the break. Put my other foot on the clutch and pushed it down. And then turned the key and started the car. So far so good. "Now slowly let out the clutch," my mom told me, "and at the same time give it a little gas." So I let out the clutch, not as slowly as I should have, and the car bucked and the engine died. I was not pleased, but mom was amused. I tried it again, maybe once or twice more, and mom was quickly seized by a fit of the giggles. She was laughing so hard that she had to call off the lesson and go in the house. What was so funny to her was that I was such a know-it-all who didn't need to listen to his mother. I was so sure I was going to get it on the first try and then reality intervened. I said she called off the lesson, but really the lesson was complete. My first driving lesson was a total success and the car never moved – beyond the violent bucking that killed the engine. But I learned a whole lot from that lesson.

What I really want to get to, though, is not this humorous and slightly humiliating lesson, or the ones that followed when I finally got the car moving and got better and finally learned to drive. What I want to think about is what it must have been like for my mother – and my father – on the day I got my license and they finally had to let me drive off on my own. I think I have a pretty good idea of how that felt because I went through that with all three of my own children. It's that moment when you have done what you can in teaching them and you really can't do any more, when the next step is theirs to take on their own. All you can do at that point is pray that they'll make it back in one piece – that they won't wreck the car or endanger their life or someone else's.

I want us to think about that because that's just where Jesus is in today's gospel reading, metaphorically speaking. We're in the last ten days of the Easter season now, the time between the Ascension of Our Lord, which was this past Thursday, and Pentecost, which is next Sunday. In these ten days the church remembers that Jesus ascended to the Father and told his disciples to wait for God to send the Holy Spirit. So this is waiting Sunday. In-between Sunday. And every year on this Sunday we get a portion of Jesus' prayer to the Father from the Gospel according to John. In John's Gospel this prayer takes place on the night of Jesus betrayal as he is sitting at the table with

his disciples. Jesus uses this last meal with them to prepare them for what is to come, for the time after his resurrection when he will no longer be with them in the way he has been. And at the end of this preparation he prays this prayer to the Father on their behalf. It's the perfect reading for this Sunday of the church year. We can imagine that it's what he continued to do after his ascension as he sat in his Father's presence. "Father protect them," he prays. This is the prayer of an anxious mother whose children are now out on their own. "When I was with them, I protected them... now I've sent them on this dangerous mission and I'm asking you to protect them." Have you ever thought of Jesus as an anxious mother? You have now! This is Jesus showing his humanity in perhaps the clearest way in all of John's Gospel.

But it's not only protection that Jesus prays for. He also prays that they might be one, as he and the Father are one. We usually take this prayer for unity to be the foundation for our attempts to reunite the splintered church. But I was led to an article this week that proposed a slightly different understanding of what Jesus means by making the disciples "one." The idea of oneness appears in the central prayer of the Jewish faith, known as the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." What does it mean that "the Lord is one?" There's not a scholarly consensus. It could mean that in contrast to all the other ancient religions, there is only one God. Or it could mean that the Lord, Yahweh, is to be Israel's only God, and that's the direction the NRSV goes. It reads "the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." The article that I read made the case for a third possibility.¹ After looking at the various ways "one" is used in the Old Testament and the context of that particular passage in Deuteronomy 6, the author suggested that what it seems to mean is that the Lord is single-minded and single-hearted. That he is not duplicitous. Not a double-dealer. In other words, to say that God is one is to say that God is trustworthy, that God can be counted upon to keep God's word, to carry through on God's promises.

If that's true, and if that's what Jesus is reflecting in our Gospel reading today, then what Jesus is praying for is that his disciples prove to be people of integrity, that they prove to be trustworthy in the mission of the gospel that he has entrusted them with. What follows the *Shema* is the command to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and might. That kind of love can only be given to one who can be counted upon. Jesus wants his disciple to be trustworthy so that people will come to trust the promises of God that they are entrusted with.

I think that Jesus wants for us the same thing he wanted for his first disciples. And I have to believe that if he prayed for his first disciples in this way, that he is praying in a similar way for us. Like a mother who has taught her son everything she knows about driving, who has led him through the first embarrassing steps right through to becoming a safe and responsible driver, so Jesus has loved us, forgiven us, and taught us all that we need to know. "Everything the Father has given me, I have given you," we heard him say last week. And now he entrusts us with his mission, and counts on us to be dependable, trustworthy, and faithful in proclaiming God's love, God's forgiveness, and God's promise of life to a world that desperately needs reliable, good news. What vote of confidence, huh? May God help us to live up to Jesus' high hopes for us. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Chris Repp, Grace Lutheran Church
Champaign, Illinois

¹ J. Gerald Janzen, "On the Most Important Word in the Shema (Deuteronomy VI 4-5)," *Vetus Testamentum* XXXVII, 3 (1987), 280-300.