

7EASTER2008- ASCENSION SUNDAY

John 17:1-17 "Whose Glory?"

Today is Ascension Sunday, the Sunday after Ascension Day (which was last Thursday). Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving his disciples to carry on the work he had called and commissioned them to do...namely spreading the good news that your sins are forgiven through his death on the cross. The disciples were told to wait until Pentecost when they would receive power to accomplish their mission. The gospel text for Ascension Sunday is always a portion of chapter 17 in John's gospel. It comes from the "High Priestly Prayer" of Jesus where Jesus prayed for his disciples and for you, his church.

Read the gospel lesson...p. 1679 in your pew Bible.

This text has been used to support "dreams of glory" in the church. Some people have said that the high priestly prayer of Jesus describes the "glorious unity of the church" as the preeminent goal for which Jesus prays. This interpretation makes the glory of which Jesus speaks commensurate with the glory of worldly acclaim usually identified with large institutional uniformity. The problem with this thinking is that every denomination with its particular and peculiar theology wants the rest of the Christian world to think as they think and do as they do. This is based on the prideful assumption that "What we believe is the most correct belief". It will always be this way because human beings, including Xians, are sinful and proud and think that truth and virtue can be locked up in their unique understanding of everything from politics to religion. The very notion that Christian unity is found in structural or institutional unity is debunked however, when you realize that every denomination in the history of the church there has been fragmented by discord.

Even Lutherans disagree on what unity means. The confessional Lutheran perspective, which is what I hold, says that when we talk about unity in the church we should not be talking about organizational or structural unity. Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession states that any form of church organization is okay as long as the gospel is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered. The original, proper and primary goal of the church is to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in Jesus. Visible, organizational, church unity however, can easily become the goal of a denomination which seeks earthly glory and forgets its primary purpose and function. But organizational unity is not a primary goal. And besides that, the unity of the church has already been given to

us in our baptism. It is God's gift to us not something we must "create" on our own.

I began by saying that this text has been used to support "dreams of glory" in the church. Those dreams are more than just about the church being a glorious institution in the world. Church bureaucrats may dream of this but I suspect you haven't spent too many nights dreaming about the glory of institutional church. But we do dream of glory for ourselves in other ways.

In a world where glory is an obsession, the means to achieve glory are constantly pursued. Glory generally accompanies three things..money, power and great personal sacrifice. We are most familiar with and most attracted to the first two, money & power for these are the easy ways to worldly glory. In a world where money equals power, if a person is rich he or she is given honor and glory. Money, power and glory go together in the world. We glorify the super rich, the sports heros and movie stars. We watch them on T.V. and read about their lives in magazines at supermarket check outs. And I am not immune from this either. For example, I enjoy telling people that Angie and I have actually been in the home of Bill Gates. Of course, it while the house was under construction and before he moved in, but just being in his house makes one feel like you have been close to the celebrity of really big money. (And I'll bet more of you will be tempted to ask me about being in Bill Gates' house than about anything else I might say in this sermon.)

We are attracted to glory that accompanies money and power as a moth is attracted to flame. We like to be close to persons with money or power because we hope some of the glory will rub off on us.

The second kind of glory is much less common since it is found in great personal sacrifice or by placing yourself in great danger or taking a courageous stand. The mantra of this kind of glory is, "No guts, no glory." "No pain, no gain." If we look at history we see that this principle is evident. People who are considered great and famous are people who suffered or gave their life for some great cause. Lincoln is revered more in death than he was in life. Martin Luther King Jr. is remembered as a great champion of freedom. But when he was alive he was considered a trouble maker. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is considered a modern day martyr because of his courageous stand against Nazi tyranny. But his government hanged him. No guts, no glory; No pain, no gain; No cross, no

crown. How very true. We like glory associated with money or power. We're not so sure about glory related to sacrifice, especially self-sacrifice.

While we may recognize the glory associated with sacrificial living we are not eager to stick our necks out for the benefit of someone else. The disciples were afraid too. When Jesus was crucified the disciples scattered and hid. They thought they might be next to face a cross. After the resurrection when Jesus appeared to his disciples he did not upbraid them for their timidity. Jesus understood their fears. But then he left them and ascended into heaven. Before he left he told the disciples not to be afraid and he told them one other thing. He said that they should **"wait until you receive power from on high"**. The power would come from the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. We remain timid and afraid of being alone in this world, afraid of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, afraid of sacrifice until we also are clothed with power from on high. Jesus knows that by ourselves we are timid, we lack courage and nerve. And so Jesus promises us the gift of the Holy Spirit that will be with us and empower us.

If this Sunday's text deals with glory next Sunday's text deals with power. Next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that gives us the ability and the courage to be unafraid of risk and sacrifice. That power comes from God. It is the power that enables us to think less of our own needs and more of the needs of others. It enables us to love the unlovable, to serve those in need, and even to take risks to help others. Jesus set an example for us.

The power we receive from the victory of Jesus on the cross is not given in order for us to receive glory. In the prayer of Jesus in our text today the word "glory" or "glorify" occurs 6 times but it never refers to the disciples receiving glory. The glory belongs to God. We are called to take the power of God and employ it in self-sacrificing love for others thereby giving glory to God. Jesus said, **"Let your light so shine before others that they might see your good works and glorify (who?) Your FATHER in heaven."** (Matt. 5:16).

Earthly glory was turned on its head in the crucifixion. Jesus died an ignoble death as a criminal. But God turned death on its head in the resurrection and we see the glory of God who destroyed the power of sin and death.

It is our glory then to be the followers of Jesus. It is our glory to be known as Christians. It is our glory to, as St. Peter says, "suffer for the sake of Christ." Not so that we will be glorified but that God might be glorified thru us.

That is how Christians see glory. Glory is hidden in service, love and sacrifice. The glory of the world is not found here. The glory of the world is found in being rich and powerful, self-centered and proud. Not so for Christians. We follow Jesus, "who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross..."(Phil. 2:6-8)

You will be faced with choices this week to choose worldly glory or the glory hidden in service and sacrifice. We know what Jesus chose. Thank God he chose to give God the glory by his death on the cross. His pain was our gain, his death was our life, his cross became our crown. And in his death and resurrection we see true glory. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayer: Our gracious God, we ask for the gift of your Holy Spirit that will take away our fear and replace it with courage. Give us strength that is willing to love as we have been loved, to serve as Jesus served, and see in sacrifice the way that leads through death to life. In Jesus Name we pray. AMEN.