

## **Acts 1:6-14**

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

## **John 17:1-11**

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

## **Last Words of Love**

A few years ago, upon the death of the great poet and writer Maya Angelou, her family released a statement where they said, "They were extremely grateful that her ascension was not belabored by a loss of acuity or comprehension. She lived a life as a teacher, activist, artist and human being. She was a warrior for equality, tolerance and peace. The family is extremely appreciative of the time we had with her and we know that she is looking down upon us with love." I love that they used the word ascension, don't you?

She was an incredible person and an amazing writer and poet. You may be familiar with some of her more memorable quotes such as:

- "When you know better, you do better."
- "When people show you who they are, believe them."
- "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

- "You can't forgive without loving. And I don't mean sentimentality. I don't mean mush. I mean having enough courage to stand up and say, 'I forgive. I'm finished with it.'"
- "My great hope is to laugh as much as I cry; to get my work done and try to love somebody and have the courage to accept the love in return."
- "Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope."
- "I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw something back." (I love this one!)

She even had a twitter account and in her last tweet she shared this thought. She said, "Listen to yourself, and in that quietude, you might hear the voice of God." You might hear the voice of God! Her last words I guess, and it got me to thinking about last words. The last words we will leave in the world, and I couldn't help but wonder what they might be. I know when we read my father's will his last words to us were to love one another and then have a big party to remember him by.

I read a similar story by a young man whose grandfather was dying and he shared this about the night he died, he said, "he knew it was happening. He accepted it. For the last half hour of his life, he sat quietly while my grandma read him the love letters he wrote to her when he was a soldier in WWII. Prior to this night, he had not spoken a single word for nearly a week. Right before he passed he looked into my grandma's eyes, kissed her hand, and said "I love you". He couldn't have gone any more peacefully."

We are so fortunate to be able to even have an opportunity to hear some of those words in our lives, and maybe, we, who are closer to the end than the beginning, might want to write some of our thoughts down in case we don't get a chance to tell those we love how much we hope for them and their lives. I've often thought I should start a long letter right now to tell my family and especially my grandchildren, how much I love them, and also, perhaps share with them what I thought was important in this life; in living. Perhaps begin my own prayer for them. I wonder what your words might be?

We are fortunate however, to have the words of Jesus this morning, as we listen in on a private moment where he is telling his disciples farewell and shares with them the hopes he has for them in his loving prayer to his Father. Jesus's words ring out pretty clearly what he would like for us. That we be one, as he and his Father are one. That seems to be a pretty clear theme as people face death. But this is what Jesus wants for us in our lives and living as well. Be one, don't be divided, love one another. Remember that the relationship you have with God is the one that really counts. In fact, Jesus says that this is eternal life, that you know God and Jesus whom he sent. It is this relationship that is the beginning of eternal life. Knowing and living and connecting with God and one another.

The late Fred Rogers said: "The connections we make in the course of a life - maybe that's what heaven is." And maybe that's true.

But sometimes we are not connected. Sometimes we are not one. There are issues that divide us as Christians. As the family of God. As people of the Way. And we can't help it, can we? We are human and we have strong opinions and we have fierce loyalties to things that maybe we haven't even thought about clearly. We believe things that are handed down to us from our families, our culture, our churches, and without being aware of it, we carry those biases and prejudices into the world with us. And when we do that we create more hell than we can imagine right here on earth. Mother Teresa said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

And in my daily devotional, Professor Linda Lee Clader shared this reflection, she said, “What if the answer to Jesus’ prayer for unity was not about solidifying into a monolithic block but, rather, was about joyful interplay, glorious dancing? If we tried that idea on for a while, could it affect how we view our own disagreements with our brothers and sisters? Perhaps the vision toward which we strive is not one of total agreement but of the ability to join, in our different ways, in the common dance of faith...” The common dance of faith. I love that idea, don’t you?

One of my favorite musicals is *Fiddler on the Roof*. Some of you may be familiar with it. If not, I strongly suggest you see it. The story, which takes place in imperial Russia around 1905, centers on Tevye, the father of five daughters, and his attempts to maintain his Jewish religious and cultural traditions as outside influences encroach upon the family’s lives. There is this wonderful moment when all the Jewish men and all the Russian men are in the tavern together. There is a deep distrust between the two groups which is palpable. As the Jewish men are celebrating the wedding arrangements that Tevye has made for his oldest daughter they are dancing and singing and drinking, and the Russian men are getting involved as well. Suddenly Tevye bumps into one of the Russians who have been outside the circle of the dance. The music stops immediately and everyone is focused on Tevye. For a moment, you don’t know if there will be a fight, or some other violence. But then, the Russian lad bows to Tevye and then offers his hand inviting Tevye to join him in the dance. Tevye bows in return and very cautiously takes his hand. They start out with slow steps as they both learn the dance of the other. Soon they are all dancing and singing together, with the Russian dancers weaving in and out between the Jewish dancers, and the songs of both groups working together as the music soars to the lyrics, To Life, To Life l’chaim! It is a powerful scene where two different cultures and religions come together in a mysterious and joyful way. A lesson for us all I think.

Makes me wonder what would happen if we danced with those whom we considered our enemies. A dance where we move together in unity, not necessarily in conformity, but working together in harmony to bring peace and unity and dignity for all. A dance where we learn from each other even as we step on each other’s toes at times. And I couldn’t help myself from hearing one of our wonderful hymns, as I thought about this dance of faith we are in together where Jesus sings,

*\*I danced in the morning when the world was begun,  
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,  
And I came down from heaven and I danced on earth;  
At Bethlehem, I had my birth.*

*Refrain:*

*Dance then, wherever you may be;  
I am the Lord of the Dance, said He,  
And I’ll lead you all, wherever you may be,  
And I’ll lead you all in the dance, said He.*

This week in Manchester England, a suicide bomber killed 22 people and injured 59 or more in an act of all too common terror. An act that should send people hiding and cowering. But as many of us watched in the days that followed, the people of Manchester gathered together to tell the world that they are united. That no act of terror will divide them and love will always have the last word; that love always wins. That being united, being one in spirit, is always stronger than hate and evil. This is a message that we are hearing more and more often and it gives me hope that perhaps God’s unity is possible in this world.

And in our story this morning Jesus’ last words are to remind us that he loves us and he hopes that we will follow him and be in relationship with him. He invites us to join the dance of his Father’s love for all, and be

united with him for all time. That in this relationship with him we find eternal life. In Him we are one. In Him we serve a greater purpose in this world as we look not just to heaven, but to the earth and God's Kingdom here on earth. A kingdom where all are invited. This kingdom where even though we disagree about many things we weave this melody of love between us until all are swept into the dance of grace, hope, and love together. Perhaps on this journey of faith you too, will bump into Jesus. And he will turn and bow and offer his hand, inviting you to join him as he sings,

*Dance then, wherever you may be;  
I am the Lord of the Dance, said He,  
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,  
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said He.*

Thanks, be to God. Amen

*\*I Danced in the Morning  
American Shaker Melody (Simple Gifts)  
Words by Sydney Carter 1963*