

“Being Sent Into the World”
A Sermon by Rev. Martha (Missy) Shiverick
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
May 28, 2006
Text: John 17: 6-19

Last Thursday Bo, Nonie, and I drove to New London Connecticut to see the fourth member of our family, Asa, graduate from Connecticut College. As we joined my parents and the several thousand other family members of graduates on white folding chairs on the beautiful college green on the sparkling sunny morning, I became aware of the importance of the occasion. The brass orchestra played and then a bag pipe band ushered in the faculty dressed in the splendor of their colorful academic garb and then the graduates marched in wearing black caps and gowns and huge, huge smiles. There were speeches, there were honorary, master, and bachelor degrees conferred and there were diplomas handed out, and there was a feeling of accomplishment by all. It was glorious! And the whole time I was also aware that all the pomp and circumstance is there to not just celebrate the actual degrees having been earned, but it is also a ceremony for a real transition in life.... an end of one chapter in the graduates lives and the beginning of another. They have been working for this moment, and we as parents have been working toward it as well. They have studied and grown intellectually and emotionally and we have groomed them for this stepping out into the world since their birth. AND, I was aware that although I am very excited for Asa, the parent in me also wants to still help and protect my 21 years old, six foot two baby boy from the world.

And in two weeks I will experience all this same emotion when Nonie graduates from high school knowing that in just two and a half months she will be heading off to college in Manhattan. Although she can hardly wait to be living in New York City, the idea of my baby girl walking around the upper West side after dark scares me almost as much as her attending fraternity parties like I did at her age.

And then I read the lectionary reading for today and I felt comforted. I am not the only person to have these anxieties of my children hitting the real world. Jesus did too! And what a great passage to be read this time of year with so many people making life transitions by graduating, getting married, or beginning new lives in new places. The lectionary reading from John takes place at the end of Jesus' life.

He knows the time is drawing near and he prays to God. He does not pray that he escape his death, as that is not what he fears. He knows he is going to be with God. No, his fear is leaving his followers, whom he has led and taken care of for years. Now they must go on their own and he is anxious. He prays to God to equip them with what they need. And as I read the prayer, I realized it is my prayer too, and the prayer of every other person who like the mother bird, must help her chickies out of the nest. Listen now for the word of God as it is written in the Gospel of John chapter 17, verses 6-19. Listen to what is known as Jesus' "high priestly prayer" or "farewell prayer".

Jesus has eaten his last supper and after speaking to those who are with him, he turns and prays to God. We hear this prayer as someone overhearing a private conversation. What is first striking is the intimacy of the conversation. He knows what is about to happen and turns to God out of his concern for what will become of his followers.

Jesus is not defeated in this prayer, not concerned personally about his death, but is pastoral about his faith community. Jesus is confident that God is listening to his prayer and that God will act on his petition. His ministry is almost over. He knows that his work was to reveal and make known God's name. His work was to teach about the God of love, compassion, and justice. His work is now done. His prayer is that now that God's nature has been revealed to Jesus' followers that they too can enjoy the close relationship with God that he does. His prayer is that his relationship with God will be open to the whole faith community. Open even to us.

Jesus is concerned about what will happen after he is gone. He has been caring for his followers and he does not want to abandon them but wants to entrust the care of his people into good hands. He does not entrust the care to a member of the community but to God. The leadership of the community who follows Jesus is God. Jesus acknowledges that the faith community comes from God and although he has been entrusted to care for it for a while and to teach the community about God's nature and work, he needs to turn it back over to God as he leaves.

He is concerned about this because he knows that his followers are different. They are not of his world just as Jesus was not. Somehow the teachings of Jesus made them outside of the society and culture of their time. And the same can be said for Jesus' followers today. We stand out from the culture and climate in which we live.

In a world where greed and corruption often seem to produce success, we live within ethical principals that stress justice for all and a sermon that said the last shall be first. In a world where a few powerful people make decisions that affect all people, we live believing that all people are God's children and of equal worth. Our Lord washed his disciples' feet instead of them attending to his. In a culture where women are portrayed in popular music and videos as mere sex objects, Jesus teaches respect for all and mutuality in love and relations. In a culture where our way is seen as the best or only way, Jesus teaches us not to judge and to first look at our own flaws before criticizing others. I as sure I was much like you yesterday as I read the Plain Dealer story of the man who died while climbing Mt. Everest while people passed him by on the trail. It filled me with horror as I am sure you did too. While the writer of the article said that that the fact no one stopped to help the exhausted man was not surprising, I guess it is part of the focus one must have to getting up the hill and making the goal of the summit, but it is to those of us who are brought up in a faith who asks that we love others as ourselves. Our culture and ethics are different. No wonder Jesus thought of us as his sheep and he was the shepherd.... We feel like we should ask, are we the little sheep being left out for slaughter in a world with separate values than ours?

Jesus asks that God sanctify and make holy his followers. Since he will no longer be with us in this world, Jesus asks that God protect us in truth, protect us in God's name and set us, the followers of Jesus apart for God's work. Jesus asks that we be protected in the truth, the truth of God revealed in the life of Jesus Christ. The protection then is God's love, God's compassion, and God's justice. Jesus prays for this protection and guidance for us with confidence that God hears his prayers, God answers his prayers, God means for us to have this relationship of protection and this same close intimate relationship with God that Jesus had.

Thank God for this prayer! Thank God for the love that is shown in it.

And this prayer is good news for us this morning who are feeling anxious and want to protect those we love as they go out into the world with out us. We have already equipped them with what they need and must have the faith that Jesus had when he handed his followers over to the care and protection of God. And indeed we have. Just as Jesus did, we have all taught our children about God's truth.

As members of this church every person agrees to take a part in nurturing the children in the Baptismal vows we say as a congregation. Through our Sunday school and Christian Education we teach the history of the Jews and the story of Jesus and the early church so that our children might know our faith and have God's law of love written upon their hearts. They learn they are not of this world, but are a part of God's through the Youth Groups, the Mission Trips, and opportunities to serve God through helping others within our church family and Cleveland community. And the care the youth give to people outside our church is also given to our members of our Fairmount community as well. This summer the deacons have organized a group of our youth who are helping a family with yard work and this fall a Saturday morning cooking ministry will begin which will involve Youth deacons and other members of the church together preparing meals to be frozen and then given to members as they come home from the hospital.

It is through these ways that we do as Jesus did with his followers in teaching the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is through our ministry that we hope to instill in our children knowledge of the god of Love, Compassion, and Justice. And although they might falter; although our children might make a few wrong turns on the paths that God has set before them as they move out in to the world, it is our hope that deep inside that a seed is planted that lets them know they are not of this world, but are of God's. Their ethics are different, their standards are different, and their mission and goals in life might be different from others. As God's own, they also know most importantly that they are loved by God. This love is unconditionally given. And, when they mess up, they will remember that they are forgiven and the loved children of God and that as God's children, there is always a redemption and renewal.

So Jesus prayed the prayer that we all have been praying for our young adults about to set out on their own. Jesus asked that God protect them, that God guard them, and that God sanctify them. Jesus prayed this with the utmost certainty that God would listen and answer his prayer. And that prayer is for us and is our prayer as well. And for that I thank God, and can breathe a little, no not a little, but a big sigh of relief!!!! Amen

The Rev. Martha M. Shiverick M.D.V., M.S.