

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, May 24, 2009
John 17:6-19
Rev. Cynthia Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

We're in the midst of a weekend of remembrance – a time set aside to remember those who died in the many wars and conflicts in which our country has been involved – and I know what we all hope for is that we can learn from our past and perhaps peace will come. But we do honor those fallen fighting men and women – with a sense of sadness for sure but also with a sense of gratitude – families gather and I know in my own, my 91 year old father, the World War II veteran, will tell more stories of his time in the Pacific. As I listen to him, I am so grateful that he came home in one piece and am moved to honor those who didn't. It's a time to pause and remember – to hear again the stories of the past and to think about how our lives have changed because of the past, and then to look ahead, hopefully to have learned from what's happened before. It's kind of a transition time as we stop and remember. Memorial Day is much more than a transition from spring into summer – we all know that.

So it is on this day in the church calendar – today brings us to the end of the Easter season in the church calendar – throughout this season we have heard the stories once again – beginning with the advent story of preparation for the birth of Christ, the Christmas season where we celebrate the coming of the prince of peace, the epiphany season when we note God's declaration of who this Jesus is – then came Lent when we walked the long and hard road into Jerusalem, experienced the horror and sadness of Holy Week, and then the unspeakable joy of Easter. During this Easter season we hear again the age old stories about the resurrection, Jesus' appearances, the disciples finally coming to really believe that their beloved Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. Then the ascension – and the great commission, Go therefore and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We remember the story.

It is a transition time too, isn't it – imagine those disciples wondering, now what do we do without Jesus in our midst, leading us, teaching us, showing us the way. What does all this mean, anyway – and maybe that's the purpose of the Easter season – to understand how this journey and especially how the resurrection helps us to be what we have been called to be. It's a time of discernment – for the disciples and for us.

What comes next? This is a point in our story where we ask ourselves as do the disciples, how God is calling each of us and what is God calling us to be and do. What are we called to do as a community? How do we keep this dream alive? How do we “go therefore and make disciples.” I can only imagine what those first disciples were feeling – how can all this continue? They are convinced that Jesus is the son of God – that in Christ they had seen the fullness of God – as much of God as they ever could or hope to see. They thought, they knew, he was God. But how do they help others see Jesus for who he really was. How much more this can be for us, removed by generations from knowing Jesus on earth.

This is a week in our church calendar when we observe maybe a bit of a time-out – the time between the ascension and Pentecost – the birthday of the church. A

transition time to regroup – a time to look back and at the same time, look ahead to new possibilities.

This time of year is a transition time for many of us too – our seniors are looking back on their school years – but also looking ahead to new opportunities and challenges. Many of them are also asking, what's next. And I know parents are looking forward with mixed emotions as their sons and daughters move away from home to that new chapter in their lives. It's a new experience, a new chapter for those parents, too, isn't it. Generates anxiety but also a sense of joy too.

Next week we celebrate the rite of confirmation and I know these students are looking forward to it – some of them relieved that their Sunday School days are over, but most of them wondering what's next for them as they take their places as members of this church. One of them put it so well this week during our interviews with them: we've come through a year of class, learning, being together, doing service projects – of course I'll continue somehow in the life of the church – what's the point if you don't after all this time? She's in the process of discernment too – just like those disciples, just like us.

How can we know what the process of discernment looks like? It seems to me that discernment must be intentional – we have to stop and work the process – take a time out, if you will.

And some guidelines for us are right here in the gospel reading for today – it describes what Jesus prays for us. Jesus prays that the community be protected from evil; that the community be unified; that the community fulfill Jesus' joy; and that the life of the church be distinct from the life of the world.

His prayer brings to mind the particular outcomes we seek in the discernment process : new life coming out of death. New life coming out of change – perhaps entirely new, perhaps a natural outgrowth of a direction we've been taking – whether that new direction is our choice or not. Last year during day camp a woman was there with her children and got word during one morning session that her husband had just lost his job. She was of course rattled, but there was little fear. She said, you know, we've been thinking about doing something radically new for us and now this just might be the chance to do that. And they did just that. How many times have we heard people say the same thing – I would never have had the courage to do what I've always wanted to do, I'd add, to do what God calls me to do, unless I was forced into it.

New life coming out of the death of a comfortable, old life.

That's what God wants for us and from us – that's what Jesus prays for us – that we are protected from the evil one in the midst of the world – that we might have joy made complete in us. That we may be in the world but not of the world – that while we are in the world we know that we belong to God and that God will always protect us.

And to have joy made complete in us – maybe we understand that best as modeling our lives after Jesus' life and living the gospel commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This week one of the confirmands went to the soup kitchen for the first time – as we drove home I asked him what he thought – he said it was great! To be able to help people in a concrete way was amazing for him – like all of you who have gone to prepare and serve dinner there, he had a new sense of joy, of purpose – and the bags of groceries you put in the shopping cart each week took on new meaning – these food items go to real people who are hungry – when is the last time a jar of peanut butter and jelly or a box

of cereal was a real gift to you? Or a fresh orange or crisp apple, red ripe tomatoes, a dozen eggs - we take so much for granted, don't we. His eyes were opened in a new way as he distributed your donations – and he spoke over and over again about how every person said thank you. So much gratitude from some who have so little – at least according to our standards.

Jesus prays that we will be in the world but not of the world – and he knows the stakes are high. Jesus calls us to bring the world back on the path. And we all have the ability to do that – perhaps in small ways but we all have the ability. The question is, will we allow ourselves to be set apart.

For the life of the church to be set apart or distinct from the rest of the world, Christians must first see themselves as sanctified, holy, and sacred beings. Knowing that God has made us whole and holy from the very beginning, uniquely blessed with all the gifts we need to be God's reflection in the world, sets us apart. Living in this way also makes it possible for others to see our gifts and to see God in us.

As Christians, for what will we be known? Will we be known for damaging our mother earth out of greed to the point where we end life as we know it? Will we use our voice for justice and peace rather than to further violence and conflict? Will we generously feed our hungry neighbors every day? Every time we shop, will we think of our neighbors? Will we invite prayerful contemplation in every decision, knowing that the answer is there – we only need to be still so we might hear God's call.

Jesus' simple but profound prayer in today's gospel has the potential to be life-changing and life giving. Imagine putting this prayer at the center of your discernment process. Seeking to be on the right path. Coming to understand this path after considering every angle. Seeking to understand it through the lens of resurrection and God's love will most certainly set us apart.

On this weekend of remembrance, let us all take a time-out: let us remember the stories and let them work in and through us to make this a better world – a world of peace which is not the absence of war, but of a peace that passes all human understanding. It's ours for the making through the grace of God who loved us enough to come to earth as a man, fully human, fully divine to show us the way.

As we approach the festival of Pentecost, let us be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Let us move from the joy of Easter as a re-creation of new life with the hope that guides us all to be God's love in the world.

Amen.

Let us pray: we praise you, O God of glory: for the resurrected Jesus who has given us life and light. For the words of our Savior which inspire and strengthen us. For the people who share this time of worship with us, and those around the world who share the great confession that Jesus is Lord. We thank you, God, for what you have shared with us, how you have worked for us, that we may live the hope of the gospel with neighbors near to us and around the world. Amen.