

WHAT WE'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR
JOHN 17:20-24
REAR ADMIRAL MARK TIDD, CHAPLAIN CORPS, U.S. NAVY
GLEN RIDGE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, GLEN RIDGE, N.J.
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Several years ago (1983) I was watching the college basketball finals. I'm not really a big fan of basketball, but the Finals are usually well worth watching. And that year, the University of Houston was heavily favored to win. But North Carolina State had come from behind so many times during the playoffs that they just could not be counted out.

Well, it was really an exciting game. Houston led through most of the game, and they looked strong. But North Carolina State was never quite out of it.

And sure enough, in the last few minutes, North Carolina State tied the game.

Then, with 3 seconds left on the clock, a North Carolina State player heaved a 35-foot desperation shot. And it was going to fall short.

But with perfect timing and coordination...and just touch of luck...one of his teammates leaped up to grab the ball, and he slammed it through hoop.

Once again North Carolina State had won at the buzzer. Now were champions. Needless to say, the crowd went wild!

The winning coach was Jim Valvano. When he was asked about his game plan in the post-game interview, Valvano said his major goal in the playoffs was always *to stay in position to win*. He said you can never guarantee victory, because there will always be an element of luck involved.

But what you *can* do is keep yourself *in a position to win*.

In our lesson, the Last Supper in Upper Room is over. Jesus has just finished a long talk with his disciples that really amounts to a farewell speech.

Then he begins to pray. He prays first for himself. Then he prays for his disciples.

And now, in our passage, he's praying for all of those who would eventually believe in him in response to the preaching and teaching of his disciples.

He's praying for the Church that was to come. In fact, he's praying for you and me.

In the middle of Jesus' prayer—and our lesson was only a portion of that prayer—Jesus prays that we will be *with* him where he is. And then he prays for a strange thing: he prays that we'll be

able to see his glory—and to *receive* that glory ourselves.

And it's not just so we can be dazzled by some great sound and light show. It's for a *purpose*: "...so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become **completely** one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (vv. 22-23).

I don't know if this ever happens to you here at Glen Ridge, but if you've ever had the opportunity to worship regularly at a chapel on a military base—and it doesn't matter if it's a Navy or Marine Corps or Army or Air Force base—you may have noticed something about that chapel experience.

What you find worshipping there are Christians from many different backgrounds, who are together, for a time, to be worshipping community—some for a few months, some for a year or two, some for longer.

We have Baptists and Presbyterians worshipping together...Episcopalians and Assemblies of God...Church of God in Christ and Congregationalists.

At times experiencing so many varieties of expressions of faith can be exhilarating. And sometimes it may seem a little strange. And at times you may have wondered about the faith of the one sitting across the aisle from you.

If you've had that experience and been aware of the differences, then I'd say you've gotten a little glimpse of what it means to be the Body of Christ—to be *one* in him. Because "*being one*" doesn't mean being *identical*. It means being joined together in Christ. It means our eyes are on *his* glory.

It means we've met the Lord.

Now I can't guarantee you'll see miraculous visions. But there are ways we can be with Christ—ways we can go where he is—and so put ourselves in a position to "see his glory."

There are several times we can meet the Lord. At some point we meet Jesus in a *personal encounter*. We often find him in middle of *suffering*. And we meet him when we go out to *serve* others.

When we do these things—when we're *empowered* to do these things—then we're in a position to see his glory.

And then, somehow, we can come together to be his body here on earth.

In Psalm 51, the psalmist asks God to "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (Ps 51:2).

"Washing" is common image for what happens when we come to Jesus, when we turn away from old ways of life in repentance and accept his forgiveness and love, when we know and acknowledge deep inside ourselves that Jesus truly is sent by the God of the universe.

This is where it all begins for us. This is first step on way to seeing that glory—a glory that is also *joy*.

C.S. Lewis captures something of the piercing joy and glory of that encounter with Christ. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is the third of his Narnia Chronicles. One of the characters is a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb. And he's just as obnoxious as his name sounds. As sometimes happens in adventures in fairy tales, Eustace turns into what he *really* is inside—a *dragon*. But turns out he's *miserable* as a dragon. He has tight gold bracelet on his arm that he had put on when his arm was much smaller, before he turned from a boy into a dragon.

Through this experience he finally faces up to himself in all of his selfishness, and self-centeredness, and loneliness. He sees himself for who he really is, and he wants desperately to change.

In what seems like dream, he meets the Great Lion. Eustace doesn't know that this is Aslan, who represents Christ in the Narnia Chronicles. Once again Eustace is transformed. And he lives to tell the tale. He tells his cousin Edmund that the Great Lion took him, while he was still a dragon, way up into the mountains to a beautiful garden with a large pool of clear bubbling water. Eustace longed to soak his hurting arm in the pool in order to ease the pain of that tight bracelet. But before he could jump into the clear, clean water, he was told he must undress.

Like any good lizard-like creature, he scratched his scaly skin and saw he could shed his skin like a snake. But underneath he was still same. So he tried again. And again. And then again. But he still had thick, ugly, scaly skin.

He continued his story for Edmund:

"Then the lion said, 'You will have to let me....' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now....

"The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone *right into my heart*. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off....

"Well, he just peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker...and more knobbly looking than the others had been. And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me...and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again!

"And then suddenly I was back here. Which is what makes me think it must have been a dream."

"No. It wasn't a dream," said Edmund.

"Why not?"

"Well, there are the clothes, for one thing. And you've been—well, un-dragoned, for another."

"What do you think it was, then?" asked Eustace.

Edmund replied, "I think you've seen Aslan." (*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, pp. 90-91)

To meet Jesus, and to see his glory, can be dangerous business. It can be a piercing joy that changes us forever. But it's here that we begin.

Another way we meet Jesus is through *suffering*.

In that Upper Room, near the end of the evening, the disciples began to understand as they never had before just *who* Jesus was. That he was, in fact, Messiah. That he had come from God. At the same time, Jesus warned them that terrible times were just ahead, but he also reassured them that he would not be defeated.

How quickly his words came true! Within hours, Jesus was arrested, and condemned, and executed.

But it was on that cross that the real glory of Jesus began to show. And then that glory burst forth in the Resurrection, when Jesus overcame not only the world but even Death itself.

For many of these disciples, the path to seeing that glory would be by way of their own suffering.

According to Acts 6 and 7, that was the fate of a young man by the name of Stephen, one of the first deacons in the young Church. Stephen was a skilled preacher, and he attracted attention in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, he also attracted the attention of the same council that had sentenced Jesus to death. And in their rage they decreed that Stephen must die as well.

Meeting Jesus can be dangerous. For Stephen, as for countless others throughout history, it has meant death. Even there, though, the glory of God breaks through, as it did for Stephen in his great vision of God just before he died.

But what does this have to do with us? There are probably not going to be many martyrs here; we're not likely to face such a fate.

And yet even if we don't face martyrdom ourselves, each of us has experienced our portion of suffering at different times, in different forms.

Maybe it has been losing someone you love. Maybe it was a relationship somehow gone badly wrong. Or a professional opportunity or promotion you desperately hoped for, but passed you by.

This is all part of the tribulation we find in the world. We can't escape it, this ordinary suffering, and sometimes we can't make any sense of it at all.

If you have walked the road of suffering for a time, you may have asked yourself, or even God, "*Why?!?*"

After a time—after asking the questions, and waiting for answers, and in the meantime mourning for those lost—we discover: *even here* we can meet Jesus. And we find him already here, sharing in our own suffering.

So we start with a personal encounter with Christ. Often we find him again in the midst of deep pain.

And then the third place where we encounter Jesus is in *ministry*. In going outside of ourselves, to serve someone else, to bring the good news we've received, we find that our Lord has gone ahead of us, and we hear him calling us to join him.

Much of ministry is service—service that takes very practical forms, like feeding the hungry and comforting the sick and taking care of each other.

Much of your ministry here at Glen Ridge has been the service of sending your pastor, David, to serve others—to serve Marines and Sailors around the world; to serve those who are stationed ashore, and those in combat, and those far out at sea; to serve those whose families wait, and wonder, and pray—and sometimes grieve because their loved one is not coming home.

And in these last 3 years in particular, as Rev. Reynolds has supported you, your ministry has been one of leadership as David has overseen the ministry of almost 500 chaplains and chaplain assistants who are serving around the world, many of whom are stretched thin spiritually and pastorally, who have been grateful as pastors themselves for the pastoral ministry of David to them and their families, and countless admirals and Marine generals and other senior leaders have also been grateful for his presence, and ministry, and his dry wit.

And in this ministry of support, the ministry of Glen Ridge has been extended around world to people who never have heard name of this church, but who still feel the effect of your discipleship and servanthood.

But at its most basic level, ministry is extending an *invitation*. It means extending invitation to people who are trying to figure out how to live...how to make sense out of a confusing world.

Speaking of the Holy Spirit and the church, the book of Revelation puts it something like this: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears this invitation and who responds also say, 'Come.'" (Rev. 22:17a) And then *here's* what we're invited to: "Let everyone who is thirsty come; let anyone who wishes take the *water of life* as a *gift*." (Rev. 17b)

This is what Jesus is *really* praying about when he prays for the church. Jesus prays we'll be

united in love, united with each other and with God. Yet Jesus prays this not just for sake of being nice to each other—but in order for the world to recognize who he really is.

That's why we're supposed to be one. So that when the world—when those far from God whom we love and pray for—when they see us together in spite of our differences—they'll see something more than us. In fact, they'll see the *One* who is always far more than us.

So this is essence of our ministry: It's showing the world through our love that Jesus is God's Son, because only he could bring us all together!

And it's inviting others to drink the water of life that comes to us *above all* as a gift of *grace*.

Our Lord's prayer for the *Church* is also his prayer for *us*.

Our Lord wants us to *be with him* where he is and to see his glory, so that we can *ourselves* become deeply convinced that Jesus *is* God's own Son.

Our Lord wants us to *be with him* so that we can find our unity in what we share in him: in the life-shattering joy of a crucified and risen Savior who loves us with a great and life-giving love.

Our Lord longs for us to *join him* so that we can extend the invitation to others—here in Glen Ridge and around the world—the same invitation we've received—to come, to be with Jesus where he is, and to join with us as together we satisfy our thirst, and find what we've been looking for.

AMEN.