



An Imperfect Faith

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Year A, 7th Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:6-14 | John 17:1-11

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This reading feels slightly strange where it lands in our church year.

We are still in Eastertide. We are still proclaiming resurrection. And yet suddenly, this week, we are taken backwards in the story. Back before the crucifixion, before the empty tomb, before Easter morning. Jesus is still at the table with the disciples. Judas has already gone out into the night, but Good Friday has not yet arrived.

It can feel like an odd interruption in the flow of the season, almost as though the lectionary has lost its place a little.

But perhaps there is something important about hearing this prayer here, in the days between Ascension and Pentecost. Because this is also an in-between season for the Church. Christ has ascended. Pentecost has not yet come. The disciples are waiting, uncertain about what comes next. And so, we are given this moment: Jesus praying for his disciples before everything falls apart. There's something very tender about that.

Jesus knows what is coming, not only the violence and suffering of the crucifixion, but also what the disciples are about to do. He knows Peter will deny him. He knows the others will scatter. He knows that fear will overtake their courage, and confusion will overtake their understanding.

And it's in that moment that Jesus prays for them.

Not afterwards, once they've pulled themselves together again. Not after resurrection, once their faith is stronger and their understanding clearer. Before all of that. Before the failure.

So many of us have learned to think about faith as though it depends on how well we are doing spiritually. Even if we would never say it aloud, there's often this quiet assumption underneath things: that God is closest to us when we are prayerful, certain, disciplined, faithful, generous, calm. That somehow the strength of the relationship depends on the strength of our performance within it.

And maybe that's why so many people feel distant from God precisely in the moments they most need closeness. Because life becomes difficult, or grief arrives, or exhaustion sets in, or doubt creeps in quietly around the edges, and suddenly prayer feels harder than it used to. Faith feels less clear. Things that once seemed certain no longer do. And it becomes easy to assume that God has become distant too.

But this prayer from Jesus tells us a different story. Because the disciples are not doing particularly well here. They are confused, anxious, and frightened. They still do not fully understand what Jesus has been trying to tell them. And within hours, most of them will abandon him completely. And yet Jesus speaks about them with extraordinary tenderness.

“They were yours, and you gave them to me.”

“I have guarded them.”

“I am glorified in them.”

It's a little startling, knowing what comes next. Because if we were evaluating the disciples on competence or consistency, they would not score especially highly in this moment.

They are not models of unwavering faith. They are simply people trying, imperfectly, to stay near something they do not fully understand. And yet Jesus loves them without hesitation.

Not because he is naïve about them. Not because he does not know what is coming. But because his love for them is not dependent on their perfection.

I think sometimes we imagine holiness as a kind of spiritual competence. As though maturity in faith means becoming increasingly polished, increasingly certain, increasingly composed. But the Gospels rarely present the disciples that way. Again and again, they misunderstand things. They become afraid. They get things wrong. They argue about status. They fall asleep when Jesus asks them to stay awake. Peter, who so confidently insists he will never abandon Jesus, will deny even knowing him before the night is over. And still Jesus claims them as his own.

There's something deeply reassuring in that, because it means that the foundation of Christian life is not our ability to hold tightly onto God, but God's refusal to let go of us.

That does not mean failure or harm do not matter. It does not mean our choices are irrelevant. But it does mean that the love of God is not fragile. It is not constantly withdrawing every time we become uncertain or overwhelmed or inconsistent. It is not dependent on us maintaining spiritual excellence.

And honestly, I think many people are carrying around a great deal of quiet spiritual exhaustion because they feel they must somehow earn or maintain closeness with God. As though faith is something we are meant to succeed at. But this passage speaks about relationship before achievement.

Jesus does not say, "They finally understood everything." He does not say, "They remained perfectly faithful." He simply says they belong to

God, and that he has loved them and guarded them along the way. And perhaps that shifts how we understand discipleship altogether.

Because maybe faith is not primarily about certainty. Maybe it is not about never doubting, never struggling, never failing. Maybe it is much more about remaining in relationship- even imperfectly. Continuing to turn toward God, even when our understanding feels partial and unfinished. John's Gospel often speaks this way. Again and again, the emphasis falls not on mastery, but on abiding. Remaining. Dwelling. Staying connected.

And that feels much closer to real life, because most of us are not moving through the world with perfect clarity and confidence. Most of us know what it is to feel uncertain, tired, distracted, overwhelmed, or quietly disappointed by ourselves. Most of us know what it is to want to be more patient than we are, more hopeful than we are, more prayerful than we are.

And into all of that, this prayer speaks gently, by reminding us that we are still held within the love of God, even there.

There is something profoundly human about the disciples in this passage. They are trying to follow Jesus while also being frightened human beings. And perhaps that is what discipleship has always looked like. Not heroic certainty, but ordinary people learning, slowly and imperfectly, how to remain in relationship with God and with one another.

Amen.