

**Acts 16:16-34**

**Psalm 97**

**Revelation 22:12-14**

**John 17:20-26**

**Sermon for May 29, 2022**

## **THE EASTER CONCLUSION**

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: As my Father sent me, so I also send you.

Today is the seventh and final Sunday of the Easter season. In the Bible's way of thinking, seven of course is the number of completion and rest:

*for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.*(Ex. 31: 17)

So in that spirit, today would be a good day to relax and find peace and joy in some of the things we've learned during this final and most fateful of all the Christian seasons.

We learned right at the beginning that the simple phrase He Lives points us towards the great and wonderful assurances that give meaning to our lives: first, that heaven exists, that over and above and beyond this world of sorrow and war and loss and death there is another and greater reality where God reigns supreme, where everything happens in accordance with God's loving nature. Second, that he lives assures us that love is victorious, that whatever in this life might seem to thwart the rule of love must and will in the end yield to the irresistible gravity of love's attraction. And third that he lives assures us that our salvation is eternal, that our lives as children of God and co-heirs of heaven with Jesus means an everlasting adventure of growth and discovery and joy awaits us all. Because of Easter, because he lives, we can take rest in the assurance of an everlasting victorious life in the kingdom of heaven.

But We learned as well that Jesus came not only to assure us of the next world, he came to bless those aspects of this world that are themselves already heavenly in nature, and to encourage us to find peace and comfort in the unhurried enjoyment of all the goodness that this fallen world still has to offer. A simple country wedding, a few fish cooked for friends over a campfire...these are not just foreshadowings of heaven; they are heaven, the heaven that is all around us if we only have eyes to see. The Christ has come to dwell among us in order to preserve and to elevate and to make us aware of and alive to the true wonder of the tremendous gift of life in His beloved creation that God has bestowed on every one of us.

And we learned that Christ has already begun the process of healing and recreating this world to shape it into an earthly heaven, that he has bestowed heavenly meaning on our old earthly way of seeing and evaluating ourselves and others. He has taught us what is truly loving and truly glorious in heaven's way of perceiving and judging. He has taught us to see true love in serving, and true glory in humility. He has taught us to become as children, that we might see the heaven that is all around us, that what is foolish in the eyes of men is in fact wisdom in the kingdom of God.

All these lessons and others are captured in essence in the haunting phrases with which he concludes his earthly instruction in the final verses of the prayer with which he concludes his ministry, the words recorded by John in our gospel reading for today. So let's lead them together.

John 17: 20-26.

What a remarkable thing, that the very last prayer Jesus offers during his earthly existence is a prayer for us.

*17:20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,*

*17:21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us*

That we may all be one. What a lovely and yet mysterious thought. We learned earlier that Jesus takes old and familiar words – words like love and glory – and teaches us what they mean in the new creation, the kingdom of God on earth.

But here, he's taking a phrase that doesn't have a history in our ordinary way of speaking and thinking, and placing it at the heart of his final prayer. So what does he mean by it?

In many places throughout the Gospel account, Jesus makes it clear that he appeared among us on assignment from God the father. John quotes him specifically to that effect earlier in this same chapter 17:

*I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do (17:4)*

And what was that work? It was to perfectly manifest God's character as a human being, to settle the issue for all time who God is, how God thinks, what God feels. Culminating on the cross, where he literally dies for us, Jesus completes the manifestation of God as fundamentally motivated by self-sacrifice, that is, by love. That perfect completion, that perfect manifestation, is what Jesus is affirming when he uttered his final words on the cross: *It is accomplished*. Jesus was one with the Father in the sense that his whole life was lived in perfect accord and perfect obedience to God's purpose of manifesting himself to the world of his children.

The authors of the Bible accounts make this same point in different ways. Earlier in his own gospels, John writes:

### **John 1:18**

*No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is at the Father's side, has made Him known. And again, Anyone who has seen me has seen the father.*

St Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Colossians: *“He is the image of the invisible God.*

When Jesus speaks of himself as being one with God, he's not uttering some New Agey platitude: he's saying that he has yielded his own will so completely to God, that in everything he says and does you can see God's own behavior, read God's own thoughts, experience God's own reactions.

Well then, when he prays that we may be in Him as he is in the Father, what he is praying for becomes perfectly clear. He's praying that our words and actions and thoughts may be in as perfect conformity to Jesus as his own are to God, that we may manifest Christ to the world as Christ has manifested God, that our purposes

may be so identical to Christ's and our obedience so perfect to his instruction, that, in seeing us, the world sees him.

“As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you,” he tells his disciples in his last command to them. Sending them to do what? To show Christ to the world, through their own example.

And that remains our instruction today as well, as it did for St. Paul when it inspired him to write:

*But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.*

In Jesus's way of speaking, a way adopted by all the New Testament authors, the “world” refers to all those who don't know God. It doesn't refer to those who don't know about God; it refers to those who don't know God, and there's all the difference in the world between those two.

In Christ's own time, there were many – the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Elders among the Jews – who knew a great deal about God, and yet who did not recognize God when he was standing right in front of them.

And what was true then remained true straight down through human history, up to and including today. By God's design, true Christianity spreads through sharing the knowledge of God, not information about God; and the only way of sharing the knowledge of God is by showing God to others. You can write theology books and preach until you're hoarse, but never succeed in showing God to the slightest degree, and hence never contribute at all to the spread of Christianity. Or as St. Paul puts it: *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.*

So, be like Christ? Is that all? Not a problem. Hold my beer.

But of course, it is a problem. A moment's self-examination will convince most of us of the lingering presence of jealousy, resentment, self-pity, pride, envy, greed, worry, petulance, laziness, gluttony, coarseness, defensiveness, and ambition clouding our days and corrupting our spirits – at least, it only took me a moment. Next week we'll hear about the gift of his own spirit that Christ provided us to aid in our attempt to manifest Him in and to the world, to those who don't know God.

But even so, we must acknowledge that it's an uphill struggle, whether you think in general or in personal terms. In general terms, the world is still a far cry from being filled with Christlike folk; and on a personal level, most of us will enter through Heaven's Gates having taken only a few faltering steps in what will be an endless journey.

But I'll close on this hopeful note. You remember I told you a couple of weeks back about a prickly, unattractive and obviously unhappy hospice aide I overheard singing softly to someone as she changed his Depends. What's worth remembering is something we've talked about many times: that God doesn't weigh things the way that we do. And it may well be that, in God's eyes, that woman's simple act of singing may be a far greater victory than Dunkirk or Waterloo. It may well be that, in God's view, we are surrounded every day by the best and most important things that ever happened. And surely that is itself sufficient reason to continue our own efforts, infrequent and feeble as they might be, to manifest Christ.

And so our prayer to bring to a close this Easter Season, heavenly father, is that You regard with the indulgent affection of a loving parent our efforts to manifest Your Son as He manifested you to the world, and that you reward our efforts as you did his, with the peace that passeth all understanding, the peace of Christ, in whose name we pray.