

Weekend of Sunday, May 29, 2022

7th Sunday of Easter/Year C

First Reading: Acts 16:16-34

Second Reading: Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Gospel Reading: John 17:20-26

Sermon Title: “Unity of Identity”

Theme

It is possible to hear in Jesus’ high priestly prayer, a prayer he offered shortly before his death, the petitions of the ascended Christ for his own throughout history—to our day—and beyond. Jesus prays for us. In holy baptism we become believers in God, have our robes washed in the flood of Christ’s forgiveness, and receive the gift of life forever with all the saints.

Texts

First Reading: Acts 16:16-34

¹⁶One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” ¹⁸She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Second Reading: Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

¹²“See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

¹⁴Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.

¹⁶“It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”

And let everyone who hears say, “Come.”

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

²⁰The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

²¹The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Gospel: John 17:20-26

[Jesus prayed:] ²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I 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. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

²⁵“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Sermon

The Gospel Reading comes from the end of what theologians call, Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. These are the last words Jesus spoke, or rather prayed, before he left the relative safety of the Upper Room. Jesus prayed this prayer out loud so that all in his presence could hear him and hear his priorities as he faced his Passion. And what he prayed was that all who believe in him, (i.e., all Christians), 'may all be one.' And he concluded by reminding believers that he has made God known to them, and he has made God known to them by his life and example of love and grace. And then, in the very next verse, John wrote:

¹After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples.

In summary, Jesus prayed that his followers may all be one, and the unifying and identifying characteristic of believers is love and grace. Please keep this in mind as we move on to the First Reading.

In the First Reading from Acts, we find the apostles Paul and Silas in Philippi doing their evangelism work among the citizenry. And as you heard, there was a slave girl there who had a spirit of divination. What is that? I'm so glad you asked.

Divination is the practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means. Divination is not of God, because it is the antithesis of faith. We are to trust God with our future, and not try to discern it by evil means. Don't laugh, this still exists today. A quick search on the internet, "fortune tellers near me" indicates that there are at least four such charlatans in Mahoning County, and probably more than that. Do they possess any real power? I don't know but I doubt it, but that misses the point. As I said, we are to trust God with our future, and not try to discern it by evil means. I've never been to a fortune teller and never will.

In the first century, ignorance about such things prevailed and as the story went, it was not the human trafficking, or that an evil spirit possessed a young girl, or even the institution of slavery itself, that bothered Paul and Silas to take action. No, it was the slave-girl's incessant harassment of them. I find this interesting. The slave-girl kept following them around and crying out, ^{17b}“These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

Wow! 1) What she said was spot-on, 2) she acknowledged that the God of Paul and Silas was the "Most High God," and 3) she knew that Paul and Silas were emissaries of the Most High God who proclaim the way of salvation! Could Paul and Silas have had better publicity?

^{18b}But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

Forget human trafficking, forget slavery, and a young woman possessed by an evil spirit, that girl was the money maker for her owners and Paul had ruined her for that purpose, and that was not good for her owner's business. So they and the citizens of Philippi dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrate who had them beaten and thrown into jail. That should have been the end of the story.

But it's not. Paul and Silas made the best of their time in the slammer by praying and singing hymns of praise to God. Please take note: when found in a jam, pray and praise.

Around midnight there was an earthquake that caused the jail doors to open. Why didn't Paul and Silas and all the other prisoners escape? I'm so glad you asked. I have no idea! In another story from Acts 12, Peter was jailed and in the night an angel made his shackles fall off and the doors of the prison open, and Peter escaped! But I digress.

Back to Paul and Silas, a Roman soldier who let prisoners escape probably just earned himself a death sentence, so he was about to fall on his sword and end it all when Paul shouted, ^{28b}"Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And when the jailer called for light and found all the prisoners accounted for, he was so moved by the living testimony of Paul and Silas that he asked the apostles how he could be saved. The apostles preached the Gospel to him and he and his family became believers. Then the jailer fed them and cleaned their wounds. Paul and Silas demonstrated and spoke the love and grace of God and as a result, an entire Gentile family became believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me ask you a question. Do you demonstrate the love and grace of God in the way you live your life, in good times and in bad?

We live in a screwed-up world, don't we?

- On May 24, last Tuesday, an 18-year-old boy was so full of hatred and rage that he did unspeakable things in his own community. The perpetrator had been bullied for years.
- On May 14, a man attacked shoppers at a grocery store. The perpetrator was a racist and all his victims were black.
- On April 12, a man attacked passengers on a NYC subway. The perpetrator was a black nationalist
- In February, one dictator invaded and still wreaks havoc upon another sovereign nation. That invasion was unprovoked in the eyes of the western world.
- Right now, abortion is once again getting headlines when other violence doesn't supersede it. For most, it is a controversial issue and the Supreme Court will not be able to end the controversy.
- And while it certainly does not rise to the level of all the other events I just mentioned, a RC bishop denied a politician the sacrament of Holy Communion because she supports abortion.

If ever there was a time when we *all* need the sacrament of Holy Communion it might just be now.

Finally, in the Second Reading from Revelation, John wrote that in his vision he witnessed the very moment of the end of time after Jesus Christ himself had decisively won the final victory. And the Holy Spirit, and the bride, the new Jerusalem, the mystical communion of saints from every place and time cry out,

¹⁷“Come.”

And let everyone who hears say, “Come.

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes, take the water of life as a gift.”

So let me ask you, who is left out when you hear the word, "everyone"?
And who is included when you hear the word "anyone"?

“Surely I am coming soon.” responded the Lord Jesus Christ.
And the church replied "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

Raisin’ the Bar Challenge

In the Prayer of the Day we offered several minutes ago, we asked that God form the minds of God's faithful people into God's one will. And we continued to ask that God make us love what God commands and desire what God promises, that, amid all the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy is found.'

I sincerely believe that God might best be described as the embodiment of love and grace and that maybe love and grace are how "true joy" might be defined.

Therefore we might say that God is love and grace, and therefore true joy is the expression of love and grace.

The prayer also asked God to 'form the minds of God's faithful people into God's one will.' I further believe that God's will is that God's people live lives that are God-honoring, which points us back to expressing the love and grace of God.

And the prayer further asks that God might 'make us love what God commands and desire what God promises.' Were you listening? Did you agree with all that with your amen? Now that I've parsed it out a bit for you, do you still agree with what you prayed?

Then as baptized children of God, our lives ought to demonstrate and aspire to find true joy, by living lives that honor God by striving for love and grace in all we do.

Prayer

O God, form the minds of your faithful people into your one will. Make us love what you command and desire what you promise, that, amid all the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy is found, your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen