

The Rev. Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Seventh Sunday in Easter – May 24, 2020
John 17:1-11

Have you ever overheard a conversation you weren't meant to hear? I remember when someone inadvertently "dialed" me – I won't use the technical smartphone term, which is rather crude. I could hear a conversation between my friend and this other person. For a moment I was tempted to just keep listening for a while. But I decided it was best to cut the connection and allow them their privacy.

In today's Gospel, Jesus *intentionally* prays directly to his Father *out loud*. Jesus is praying on *behalf* of his disciples, and he wants them to hear what he is saying. Jesus has already told them what must happen, over and over again, but they never seem to understand. Jesus may be hoping that their hearing *this* prayer will finally get through.

This is a bittersweet moment in Jesus' relationship with his disciples. Jesus wants to warn them of the dark, difficult days to come. But he also tries to reassure them in his prayer to his Father: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as *we* are one."

But Jesus is asking for more than their protection. Jesus is asking for their *empowerment*.

Jesus' followers are confused. They don't *understand* how Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. They don't understand *where* he is going or *why*. And they *won't* understand until *Pentecost*, when Jesus' promise of the Spirit becomes undeniably, powerfully *real*.

Today is the Sunday following the Ascension, a feast day that used to have more prominence on the Church calendar. Throughout the first Easter season, Jesus appears and disappears, always coming as a *surprise*. And now he leaves the disciples' sight a final time. In a way, they are more bereft than ever. They must be asking themselves, "Now what? We've been asked to wait... wait for *what*?" So, they keep standing there, not knowing what to do.

As they stand looking up, two "men in white robes" – angels? – challenge them: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you to heaven, will return in the same way you saw him go into heaven." So, these followers of Jesus return to Jerusalem to wait. And pray. And to pay *attention*. They are waiting *actively*.

The great theologian Paul Tillich has some wonderful things to say about waiting. He writes: "Although waiting is *not* having, it is also *having*. The fact that we *wait* for something shows that in some way we already *possess* it. If we wait in hope and patience, the power of that for which we wait is already effective *within* us."

The one "who waits passionately is already an active power himself, the greatest power of transformation in personal and historical life."

A writer called Barbara Stahura puts the same process in more *personal* terms: "When you actively wait, your main task is to simply pay attention. You don't have to do anything else just then. Simply notice what is happening around you as well as *within* you. Be alert to what appears, and to your responses, as you live your daily life. Be receptive to suddenly appearing synchronicities, nudges

from your intuition, or new things or ideas that may startle you with their rightness. Because ideas, insights, and discoveries *will* show up, but if you are frantically scrambling around in your haste to just get through this time, you could easily miss them.”

Oh, how I relate to her words! These “nudges,” these moments of inspiration, are easily overlooked. But if we are paying *attention*, we just might be hearing the voice of *God*.

As we wait, Jesus is telling us that *each* of us bears the image of God: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.”

For the first disciples, that was hard to believe, but after the Ascension, they were finally beginning to accept a new reality. That’s how they could wait *actively*, with patience and expectation. And begin to know that they were far more connected to God than they had ever imagined.

I was reminded of a scene in in Disney’s *The Lion King*. Rafiki tells the now adult Simba, who is grieving the death of his father, Mufasa, that he knows where is father is. He takes Simba to a pool of water and tells him to look down. Simba complains, “That’s not my father, that’s just my reflection.” “No, look *harder*,” Rafiki says. As he looks, Simba begins to recognize his father in his own reflection. “You see?” Rafiki hums; “*He lives in you.*”

The risen Jesus lives in us and works *through* us. Sometimes we have to wait, *attentively*... to feel the presence of God and to discover who we are and what we’re being called to do. As we pay *attention*, we’ll *always* hear what we most need to **know**.

Amen.