

## **Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist**

### **John 17:1-11**

When Jesus finished saying these things, He looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the time has come. Glorify Your Son, so that the Son can glorify You. You gave Him authority over everyone so that He could give eternal life to everyone You gave Him. This is eternal life: to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You sent. I have glorified You on earth by finishing the work You gave me to do. Now, Father, glorify me in Your presence with the glory I shared with You before the world was created.

“I have revealed Your name to the people You gave me from this world. They were Yours and You gave them to me, and they have kept Your word. Now they know that everything You have given me comes from You. This is because I gave them the words that You gave me, and they received them. They truly understood that I came from You, and they believed that You sent me.

“I’m praying for them. I’m not praying for the world but for those You gave me, because they are Yours. Everything that is mine is Yours and everything that is Yours is mine; I have been glorified in them. I’m no longer in the world, but they are in the world, even as I’m coming to You. Holy Father, watch over them in Your name, the name You gave me, that they will be one just as we are one.”

### **1. The Meaning of Life**

In Act 5, scene 5, of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the character Macbeth has heard that the queen is dead and he knows his own death is imminent. At this time he delivers his famous soliloquy:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow  
creeps in the petty pace from day to day,  
to the last syllable of recorded time,  
and all our yesterdays have lighted fools

the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle  
life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
that struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
and then is heard no more. It is a tale  
told by an idiot. Full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

Is Macbeth right? Is life nothing but a shadow having no substance, no meaning? Writers and philosophers since recorded have tried to answer that question. I don't think any of them have been successful in answering the question to everyone's satisfaction. Someone once said that "Trying to speak about the ultimate reality is like sending a kiss through a messenger." We might understand their point. Something of its truth is lost in the translation.

What is the meaning of life? A philosophical question to be sure but this is not only the philosopher's question. It is a genuinely human question and therefore a question that we all ask. It might be a question that is asked in despair or hope, out of cynicism, out of sincere curiosity and a deep desire to have goals and guidance in life. However we raise the question about the meaning of life, it is our most basic and fundamental question.

So it comes as no surprise that Jesus deals with this question and answers it.

## **2. Jesus Said**

Jesus is praying for the disciples. He is praying for God to glorify Him so that he can glorify God. God had given Jesus authority over everyone so that Jesus could give eternal life to everyone God gave Him. Jesus describes eternal life as knowing God and Jesus Christ, whom God sent.

Jesus had told these disciples about God. These disciples had belonged to God, who gave them to Jesus. They had kept God's word. They know that

everything Jesus says and does comes from God. Jesus gave them the words, and they received them. They understood that Jesus came from God—they believed that God had sent Jesus into the world.

So now Jesus is praying for them. Everything that is Jesus' is God's, and everything that is God's is Jesus'. Jesus is going back to God, but these disciples will be in the world. Jesus is asking God to watch over them, that they will be one, as God and Jesus are one.

Perhaps the meaning of life comes down to following God—following Jesus—living the life that God needs us to, and doing what Jesus would do. Perhaps WWJD—What Would Jesus Do—is the meaning of life.

### **3. Being Church**

An urban church with a small membership and a shrinking budget made use of its space for as much weekly ministry as possible. Families without homes found shelter in their church during daytime hours. A biweekly food pantry fed over 200 families. Every Sunday the soup kitchen offered a hot meal to as many as 150 people. Besides these ministries, people would pop by during the week, seeking assistance with an electric bill or rent. If the money was available, it was given.

There were never many people in the pews on Sunday mornings, but for most of the urban community surrounding the church, it was an invaluable resource for shelter, food, and community support. It was a place where you could go to have your most basic human needs met in the most human way possible. Each person was treated as a person, as someone loved by God.

Of course, not all things were idyllic. There were occasions when the pastor and the leadership at the church needed to say “no.” When some homeless men and women started sleeping in the alleyway in the back of the

church, making wary the families and children who used the inside of the church for safe shelter during the day, the pastoral leadership told the people sleeping in the alleyway that they could no longer stay there at night. Besides, the alleyway did not honor their humanity. Wouldn't a warm bed at the YMCA or other overnight shelter be preferred?

This small urban church was trying to help as many as they could.

#### **4. Keepers of the Aquarium**

Paul Harvey, the well-known radio broadcaster, once said, "Too many Christians are no longer fishers of men but keepers of the aquarium."

We can take that to mean that we Christians are more concerned about preserving the church than we are about touching the lives of other people, more concerned about preserving our "religion" than we are about helping people discover the source of wholeness, the fountain of living water that wells up to eternal life.

#### **5. Giving While We Are Alive**

There's an old story of a conversation between a pig and a cow. The pig is complaining to the cow that nobody ever has a kind word for him. "Look at the way I give of myself," he says. "I produce bacon, ham, and pork chops. The bristles of my skin are used for brushes, my hide for luggage. Why, some people even pickle my feet and consider them a delicacy. Why is it then that everyone speaks more kindly of you, the cow, than of me?" To which the cow replied, "My friend, perhaps it is that I give of myself while I am still alive."

## 6. Ascension Sunday

Today is also Ascension Sunday.

Ascension Day commemorates the Christian belief of the bodily ascension of Jesus into heaven. It is one of the ecumenical feasts of Christian churches, ranking with the feasts of the Passion, of Easter, and Pentecost. Ascension Day is traditionally celebrated on a Thursday, the fortieth day of Easter, although some Christian denominations have moved the observance to the following Sunday

The observance of this feast is of great antiquity. Eusebius seems to hint at the celebration of it in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, St. Augustine says that it is of Apostolic origin, and he speaks of it in a way that shows it was the universal observance of the church long before his time.

In Western Christianity, the earliest possible date for Ascension day is April 30, the latest possible date is June 3.

For many, Ascension Day will go relatively unnoticed. Forty days after Easter is just another Thursday with many of us in our ordinary weekday routines. The event it celebrates, however, is an important episode in the life of Jesus that the church has regarded highly through the years.

Our creeds affirm the Ascension as a central doctrine of the Christian faith. The Apostles' Creed reads, "He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty." The Nicene Creed similarly states, "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father."

Centuries later, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, emphasized the day by including it as one of three non-Sunday holy day observances. The other two are Good Friday and Christmas.

## **7. Ascension**

As a child, Sheila attended the United Methodist Church and the Catholic Church. Both lent to her understanding of who she was in Christ. However, it was the Catholic Church where she learned of the ascension of the Lord.

Forty days after the resurrection, after walking, talking, and breaking bread with a couple of His followers, after confirming His fulfillment of the scriptures, and giving further teachings to His followers, Jesus delivered His final commandment and mandate to His disciples, then ascended into heaven.

The ascension story allowed Sheila the opportunity to visualize herself, at a young age, being lifted up from this earth and ascending into the heavens, as if she were Jesus. As her faith matured, she understood the Ascension of the Lord to be more than a physical act; it is also a transformative spiritual mandate.

## **8. John Wesley**

The Ascension has a special meaning for United Methodists. It is the commemorative date of when John Wesley's heart waxes "strangely warmed," or the day of his transformative spiritual ascension.

John Wesley struggled with a lack of faith. He went to a society on Aldersgate Street where Martin Luther's preface to Romans was being read. Wesley wrote, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Not long after this experience, John Wesley began to live out his transformative ascension. He became a witness of the faith, and through his life, he became a witness for Jesus throughout the ends of the earth.