

Sermon by Pastor Gerry Hanberry for Trinity UCC, Manchester, MD on May 24, 2020 Title: "Power to Protect" (Ser20-21)

In the very last verse of our scripture text for this week, as Jesus comes to the end of a prayer for the disciples – it's really a prayer for the world, even a prayer of us today -- Jesus says, "*Holy God, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.*" Jesus spends a lot of time with the disciples, almost all the time during the three years of his public ministry. It is fair to say that much of what Jesus does, including healings and miracles and the telling of parables, is done as part of equipping the disciples for their ministry in the future. He knows he will not always be with them and so he is devoted to preparing the disciples to continue his work in the world. But as long as he can he wants to protect the disciples and keep them connected and together. He also wants to send them out to a hurting and needful world to share his love and healing ministry with people in other places.

This is much like the thing we might say to our children or spouse as they leave the house to go out to work, to the store or to school. Even though many of us aren't really going out much, but when we do, it is even more crucial for us to pray for the protection of our loved ones out in the world. To pray they not only return home again, but return safely and well.

Especially in these times, some of us feel powerless to deal with the invisible threat of the Coronavirus. Thus, we pray even the more that all will be protected and safe. Moreover, as we watch the news and listen to more and more competing voices and messages about how to live our lives in these days, we wonder: "Who's really in charge?" More than that, we wonder what would "being in charge" look like. What is the power we yearn for to make us feel whole, safe and secure? What makes us feel connected with our loved ones (family and friends) when we are physically apart? We want our loved ones to have a sense that we go with them and that their connection with each other gives them the power to be safe and to come home safe and sound.

Pat and I have four grandchildren and Pat has a nephew in her family of origin in Minnesota; all five are graduating high school this Spring. Or at least they are trying to graduate. They will graduate but probably not walk across a stage and receive their diploma. They are excited about going off (may or may not start on-campus) to college in the fall. Two of them will play a college sport: Zion will play basketball and Shaem, Jr., soccer. What will all that look like this coming Fall? Who knows? Who is in charge of all that? Their parents have spent the last 18 years preparing them to leave home and go off to further their education. Two other grandchildren and a niece and nephew are already in college and they

just spent the last two months back at home. Their parents pray daily that they will be not only equipped to succeed—and make a difference in the world--out in the world but will be safe and secure and connected with their families that love them.

This is in some way exactly what Jesus is about in these chapters in the middle section of John's gospel, especially in chapters 12-17. He is preparing the disciples for the future. All of this takes place on their long journey to Jerusalem, the city where Jesus faces this ultimate challenge and where the disciples are put to the test of how well they have learned the lessons Jesus is trying to give them.

The text for today (John 17:1-11) begins with one of those interesting statements: "*After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said...*" That's how the text in verse 1 of chapter 17 begins. To understand how to get into the text in chapter 17, we have to go back to the last verses of chapter 16 to see what Jesus has just said. This can get tedious sometimes, but suffice it to say this: Jesus tells the disciples that the time is coming when he won't be with them anymore--not in a physical- person way anyway—and that also they will be scattered back to their home areas or to other places in their public ministry.

Just like those parents who are sending off their High School graduates to college, they will be scattered and not at home anymore. Except with Facebook and FaceTime and Skype, etc. they can still talk and see each other anytime during any day. Nonetheless, they will be scattered.

Then Jesus says, even so, he is not alone in the world because of his connection to God, Abba/Father God. Jesus is in God and God is in Jesus. They are united. He tells the disciples he wants them to be untied with him and with each other in just the same way. In the last verse of chapter 16 Jesus says, "*I have said this to you so that in me you have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world.*"

Can you imagine the spiritual power to which Jesus refers? He is offering that power to the disciples...AND HE OFFERS THIS SPIRITUAL POWER TO US.

Then at the end of our text today from chapter 17, Jesus says almost the same thing, only in a little different way: "¹⁰*All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.* ¹¹*And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one*"

“That they may be one, as we are one

Great ideal, fantastic goal, but let me caution us as Pastor Martha Spong says of this goal put forth by Jesus: *“We can’t all be one until we believe that all people matter equally to God.”* Additionally, she says this, *“We cannot all be one—we cannot realize the prayer of Jesus—unless we believe that all people matter equally to God. To do so requires us to shift our motivation from determining what is good for a narrowly defined ‘us’ toward considering all people as part of the ‘one (Martha Spong, a UCC minister, in the May 20,2020, edition of “The Christian Century”.*

This write/pastor goes on to ask these questions about the passage in John 17:1-11: *“What if we took this kind of collective view in every season, not just in a time of crisis? What if we looked at one another and saw all people as valuable, as part of the oneness Jesus desired for the people around him?”*

Not just for our loved ones. Not just for those we know and love. Not just for the other people in our church or at our work or in our class at school. Not for just the people who look like us. NO. ALL PEOPLE MATTER.

Then Spong says,

The disciples would go on to found a community of faith modeled on their understanding of the things Jesus taught, providing for the needy and vulnerable in their circle of care, in part by adjusting their own expectations of what they required. From that frame of reference, with that theological stance, they grew a community of faith handed down to us over millennia but buffeted by our attempts to make it more like the world.

This was and still is a world that Jesus desired. A world in which we use our power, indeed, our spiritual power to keep the world safe, to keep our loved ones safe (as safe as possible) and that seeks to keep us connected.

This is my prayer for each one of you and all of you this day. Amen.