

May 28, Seventh Sunday of Easter

John 17:1-11

by [Anne H. K. Apple](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue

Jesus says, “Now they know. . . . Protect them.”

Can what you do not know hurt you? At an ecumenical clergy gathering in Memphis, I did not know many folk. When I arrived it was a predominantly male crowd. In the South, we play nice. While we waited in line in the crowded space, I turned to my neighbor and introduced myself and said where I served. He responded only with his name. So, because we play nice, I innocently and curiously inquired, “And where do you serve?”

He curtly responded, “I am the bishop.”

It was one of those moments—the intersection between when I didn’t know something and when all things became clear—in this case, all things sartorial. A sense of awareness settled about how disconnected the two of us were by the clothes we wore for the daily work of ministry in the same city. In that moment, our oneness in the one we serve was overshadowed by the barrier of a piece of clothing, and by the unspoken regulations that broker meaning and power.

I said to the bishop, “Well, glory be! Guess that’s what the purple shirt is all about, huh?”

Not a smile, nothing. Only silence and a glance that packed shame. When we are called together as religious leaders, the idea is to open our hearts and lives to God’s instruction in a particular space in time. The space between the two of us in the lengthening breakfast line did not feel like much of a blessing.

In John 8, Jesus is teaching the Jewish people in the treasury of the temple. Here Jesus stakes his claim: his oneness with God. He is about to continue his journey on the road that will lead across the Kidron Valley and into a garden where he will be betrayed—and he knows it. With stones in their hands, the people press in upon

Jesus. He shakes the foundation of their faith when he suggests that he is one with God. So they search for a way to diminish this claim—they seek to deny his very identity. Their collective voice of suspicion shouts louder than his steady voice of compassion in the face of their lack of understanding. They don't know who stands before them.

Jesus asks them, "Why do you not understand what I say?" It's as if he is saying what God has said about him before. At Jesus' baptism God thunders, "Listen to him." Now Jesus says, *Listen to me. I have something important, something life changing to share with you.* With self-emptying humility, Jesus claims who he is as the Son of God, repeating several times that he is seeking his father's glory, not his own.

To glorify God is to know where you have come from and to whom you belong.

By this week's reading, Jesus has left the temple and is approaching the garden. He looks up to heaven and launches into prayer. This prayer is what we have come to know as the Priestly Prayer. It is a blessing of loving-kindness spoken aloud, one that connects the group of disciples to one another and that will carry them across the troubled waters of evil, darkness, and betrayal.

We do not memorize the Priestly Prayer like we do the Serenity Prayer. Maybe we are more ready to accept what we cannot change than we are to seek unity in Christ Jesus. Maybe it's too difficult to trust that unity does not mean uniformity. Unity can sound like doctrinal conformity, and doctrinal conformity can lead to rules and regulations that broker power.

Jesus simply prays through the lens of glory—glory given by God to Christ, making them one. To glorify God is to know where you have come from and to whom you belong. It is to take rest in the blessing that comes when we put others before ourselves, to serve strangers by shining the light of the world into the shadow of all-consuming darkness. To glorify God is to risk opening our hearts by living into oneness in Christ Jesus when we would most often not bother to expend the energy that it takes.

In this Priestly Prayer before God, Jesus pleads for the disciples, and all future believers, to be one. That oneness is a blessing Jesus knows intimately with God. "They have kept your word," Jesus says to God, facing his betrayal and departure. *They have followed me here. They know something of the intimacy of our oneness.*

Protect them.

“Christ is the love incarnate that casts out fear,” writes Nels Ferré. “As sure as Christ is Christ, a real Christian breaks down barriers among groups at home, among the churches, in the communities, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus pleads with God for protection for the disciples and for us, that we might be about the work of breaking down barriers. He understands how difficult the work of breaking down barriers in Christ’s love will be.

It is hard to accept that we need the blessing and protection of a God who guards and guides our lives. With God’s blessing and protection, we are able to create spaces of blessing wherever we find ourselves, trusting that we live in unity before one God. Jesus says, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Glory. Might it be.