

May 16, Easter 7B (John 17:6-19)

Jesus' high priestly prayer is a call to a new kind of knowing and loving.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [May 5, 2021](#) issue

For many years, I struggled to make useful sense of Christian mystical writings. Much as I admire Bernard of Clairvaux's productivity, how many sermons on the first three chapters of the Song of Songs does anyone need? But proliferating contemporary spiritualities don't seem to be especially bashful about visionary and mystic experience, from drinking ayahuasca to casting hexes. And the vast mystical corpus within the Christian tradition isn't going anywhere.

So I recently went back to Bernard McGinn's anthology for help. Mystical "consciousness," McGinn writes in the introduction to *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, is comprised not of ecstatic or spiritual experience but of "new ways of knowing and loving based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming center of life."

I had found it too easy to polarize love and knowledge between the mundane, "secular" experience of daily life, with all its duties and consolations, and the kind of "mystical" experience of insight and union with God that I assume is available only by a special divine gift, extensive ascetic practice, or hallucinogens. There was no room for the more gradual transformation of perception and love within God, or for the more subtle and chronic estrangement from the world, witnessed in so many mystical texts.

That polarization between mundane and mystical can make a passage like Jesus' high priestly prayer difficult to navigate. It is indeed about new ways of knowing and loving. "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent," Jesus says shortly before today's excerpt. It is about that union with God the Father that comes through the mediating exchange brokered by Christ, in which the disciples come to possess the divine word of truth

and God comes to possess them. And it's about the obscurity of the disciples in the eyes of "the world" and their sanctification amid that world's hostility.

In another context, coming from another voice, these invocations of possession and leaving the world while the followers stay behind might have reasonable listeners edging toward the exits. John's Gospel includes no prayer of agony in Gethsemane, no tears dropping like blood, and no touchingly human appeal for the cup of suffering to pass. There are no drowsy disciples missing the gravity of their Lord's situation. It is, humanly speaking, an odd situation in which to talk about being glorified.

Instead, the pathos of this moment is more for the disciples than for Jesus. In its Gospel setting, the prayer falls between Jesus' foretelling of his betrayal and proclamation of a new commandment in chapter 13 and his arrest in chapter 18, during the meal that is destined to be remembered by Christians ever after. The prayer connects a past of walking with Jesus that the disciples have only dimly understood to a future they can't possibly anticipate.

To endure this future, they will need to know and love God in a new way. Their perception will need to be transformed, if not by a sudden vision like Saul on the Damascus road or Jacob at Bethel, then by the gradual work of sanctification. They will have to find God and God's eternal life not as a distant object to be sought, but as one to whom they have already been delivered and who is already at the center of their existence. They don't even have to leave town to be "sent . . . into the world," as Jesus says.

One may search in vain for an imperative aimed at us in this prayer. Where shall we go? What daily practices, seasonal purgations, or focused meditations will sanctify us? How will we know we are being sanctified? How may we reliably attain to this knowledge of truth and of God that is, in itself, eternal life?

But Jesus does not here succumb to the later Christian tradition of disguising an exhortation to the congregation as a supplication to God. What has been passed down to us, through a thicket of Greek transitive verbs and English prepositions, is an intimate and earnest appeal from Jesus to the one he called Father on behalf of those overhearing him. He prays that they (and we, who believe through their word, as the verse following today's passage indicates) would belong to God as they belong to him, and that they would be preserved and protected from the evil one.

So the high priestly prayer ends up as one of those passages that does not give us something to do or to believe (law and gospel, as some of us put it). It rather depicts an itinerary from God to us, and from us to God, in which we will be given unforeseeable opportunities to participate. Try as I might, I can't convert these words into an article of faith or a concrete task to accomplish. The prayer provides neither mundane knowledge nor a rapture to the third heaven. It simply includes the unnumbered listeners and their infinite futures within a supplication from Jesus to the One who sent him. Knowing and loving God from within those words would be its own transformation, its own mystical experience, and its own reward.