

Sunday June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025

Easter VII

**PRAYER:** All nations on earth shall bless you, O God, for you have redeemed your people and brought them new life. Through Christ you have caused your Word to shine on the just and the unjust. By your Spirit all those who believe know of your saving power. We come confessing that Christ is our Saviour; we give you all glory for your gift of redeeming grace. Amen.

**OFFERTORY SENTENCE:** The Apostle Paul commends us in 2 Corinthians 8:12 to approach this moment of our worship in a special way. He writes “For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has-not according to what one doesn’t have.” May we be found eager to give to the greater cause of God’s kingdom in our community.

**OFFERTORY PRAYER:** O righteous God, we have heard your Word, how we ought to obey you. We have confessed our faith in Christ our Saviour. Full of your Spirit, we come now bringing our offerings. They symbolize our thanksgiving and reflect our commitment. Accept them and use them to spread the good news of salvation all over the earth. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:**

Gracious and loving God, we come before you in prayer, not because we claim to know how or what to ask, but because we know there is no one else to whom we can turn. We know by faith and our experience that you will meet us here in this place and meet us as we are, even though we betray the goodness for which we praise you. When we ponder our faithful moments, we bless you for having created us in your image; but when we consider our unfaithful moments, we bless you for not allowing us to try and reshape you into our image.

Waiting together after Jesus’ ascension, the disciples were assured by your Son of the coming of the Holy Spirit that would empower them to become witnesses for Christ and to not only do his good works but do even greater things to your glory. Sometimes, much to our detriment, we are more conscious of the absence than the presence of the Holy Spirit. We are keenly aware that we rarely feel the power and the courage that your first disciples experienced or even those who became a part of the early church. O God, we acknowledge our weakness this morning, and not only that we accept responsibility for our weakness. Many of the things we have attempted for your Kingdom have hardly taxed our strength, let alone demanded yours. You call for steps of faith and yet, we would rather stay where we are hoping that by some miracle things will change and hearts will be turned to the light. O God, how often have we been called to advance your purpose in this community, but have ended up frustrating it? Forgive us, dear God, for not using the power you so freely gave us, or worse, not enlisting that power in the service of your will. Forgive us, too, for complaining about the cost of discipleship or, worse, for confusing inconvenience with sacrifice.

Deliver us from the temptation to compound the sin of loose talk with the search for cheap grace.

When things go wrong, we accuse you of hiding your face from us. We associate you with life’s good things-good health, good food, good clothes, good housing, and good fortune. Yet, we understand sometimes things go badly for us. And we turn against you for having perceived you have turned against us. How we forget our Lord’s reminder that in the world we would have tribulation. We also forget the prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints from whose path we stray by our wasted pursuit of an easy road to a perfect life.

We beg your forgiveness, O God, for our failure of memory and of faith. Teach us the lessons of true discipleship. Help us count and pay the cost without complaint or regret.

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Let us endure suffering neither for its own sake nor for the sake of human praise. Keep ever before us what we remember today around your Son's table. Speak to us through the bread and cup of the true cost of following your way. Remind us of that sharing in Christ' suffering means we will also share in His glory. So, hear our prayer, O Lord, and bend our wills in obedience to yours.

**BENEDICTION:** Let us go, remembering that we are one, even as the Lord our God is one. Let the faithfulness of our lives and the fullness of our love proclaim to the world that none of God's creatures is ever alone. Amen.

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John 17:1-11

“Facing Heaven”

Rev. Perry Green has put together a list of “Cards You’ll Never See at Hallmark”. I would say that if you ever get a card with the following sentiments in it you have some serious matters to attend to. So here we go. Imagine getting a card with this printed on it. “Looking back over the years that we’ve been together, I can’t help but wonder...What was I thinking?”

How about, “I’ve always wanted to have someone to hold, someone to love...After having met you, I’ve changed my mind.” “As you grow older, Mom, I think of all the gifts you’ve given me...Like the need for therapy.” How about, “You look great for your age...Almost life-like.” “I’m so miserable without you...It’s almost like you’re here.” “We’ve been friends for a very long time...What do you say we call it quits?”

“As days go by, I think of how lucky I am...that you are not here to ruin it for me.” And my personal favourite, “You are such a good friend that if we were on a sinking ship and there was only one life jacket...I’d miss you heaps and think of you often.” (Sermon Central.com) I don’t think those cards are very appropriate for a company like Hallmark whose advertises with the slogan, “When you care to send the very best.”

We are, however, very fortunate that we have card stores in every mall, and now websites to create “Ecards” that can help us find the appropriate sentiments to express to people on the right occasion. However, in St. Paul’s day this was not the case, so instead he wrote beautiful words to express how he felt towards other people. Words so well-crafted they should be on a greeting card. Listen to what he writes to the Christians in Philippi.

“I thank God upon every remembrance of you, always with every prayer of mine making request for you with joy...it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart...For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 1:3-4, 7, 8) I wonder how many folks wish their spouse would talk to them with such affection.

Warren Wiersbe in summarizing these verses writes that Paul is saying, “I have you in my mind, I have you in my heart, and I have you in my prayers.” Isn’t it wonderful to know that somewhere out there is at least one person who has that much affection for us? Having said this, I am sure that there are some people in this world who truly believe that nobody loves them with such depth of heart. I am talking about people who know that folks may like them but does anyone truly love them.

I am also talking about people so beaten up by life, or abused by people who should love them, or people abandoned by society, people who may be sitting in these pews even this morning. People who sometimes sulk and speak the childish mantra, “No body loves me, everybody hates me, I’ll think I’ll go and eat some worms.” I am not talking about the occasional pity party we may indulge in, I am addressing that deep dark thought that it just might be true that no one truly loves me, for who I am.

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Call it an anxiety of the human condition; a blight of the soul, but this dark thought can steal away our vitality and most assuredly our hope. I am mindful of the parable of the Prodigal Son, who, if you will remember, went away and parted away his inheritance. When his money ran out, so did his so-called friends; people who only liked him when he could be exploited.

When he came to his senses, while mucking around with some pigs, he decided to return home to his father, not because he believed his father loved him, but he believed it was his only choice. Are we prodigal sons and daughters, feeling abandoned by friends and family, and is it true that some of us are truly unloved? Is this how you feel right now or recently in your quiet, thoughtful moments?

Now here is the kicker. I firmly believe that the greatest lie ever perpetrated by Satan is the lie “I am not loved”. Nothing can please the dark one more than getting us to despair and lose hope. It is a lie when we tell ourselves that we are ever, even for one second, unloved. We should know, with full assurance, that God loves us, and he loves us with a love that no human being could ever replicate.

And proof of this great love is found in our gospel lesson for today. Remember what I said about St. Paul’s words to the Philippians? Love, great love for anyone, is expressed in our minds, our hearts, and our prayers. If this is the case, then John 17 indicates that Jesus really loves us. This passage is sometimes called “The High Priestly Prayer” of Jesus, because he is interceding on our behalf as a priest does. Furthermore, Jesus indicates that he voices this prayer out loud, not for God’s benefit, or his own, but for his disciples and in turn us.

This was also the case in John 11 when Jesus prayed at the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus’ vocalized prayers are declarations of his love and care for all of us. Just like with Hallmark, Jesus in his prayers is “caring enough to send his very best”. It is an important prayer this one in John 17, because Jesus speaks of his purpose in coming. It is a purpose to glorify the Father, and to prepare us all for the journey ahead, until we reach heaven.

Jesus’ prayer is recognition that this journey will not be an easy one. The world is at odds with the loving work of God in his people. Elsewhere, Jesus describes our presence in this world as “sheep among the wolves” (Luke 10:3). Every word Jesus taught his disciples, every miracle performed, and every aspect of the biblical record, is designed to prepare us, and preserve us from the hostility of the world.

Now I know what you might be thinking. “Darrell, it’s not that bad. I don’t feel persecuted or oppressed.” For we Canadians that may be somewhat true. We do not often face the pointy end of a sword because of our faith, but there is still a great deal of hostility surrounding us. Sometimes, as we know, it is expressed as indifference, sometimes as ridicule, and often as criticism.

We are also pressured on every side by secular ideologies like materialism, hedonism, and situational ethics. However, if you do not believe the world is hostile to the people of God, just try and speak against an immoral social trend or liberty.

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Recently, our Baptist Women had a campaign encouraging churches, to take a stand against human trafficking. And having served on the board of Victim Service for a while now I can tell you it's a serious problem in Norfolk. The campaign was entitled, "Sex is not a sport", is an attempt to end the sexual exploitation of woman and children that occurs on a grand scale at major world events.

It was launched to coincide with the Pan Am Games held in Toronto a few years back. What was frightening was the blowback, to the protests against human trafficking. How hostile the world got when people started holding silent vigils, right in the heart of this event, challenging the darker and seedier side of these gatherings.

Now at least on some level, we get this idea that the world is hostile to those of us who follow Christ, but there is one other direction hostility can come from. One that is far more disturbing. In verse 20, Jesus prays for us who have believed his testimony, and he asks the Father that we may become one, just as Jesus and the Father are one. This unity is for the sole purpose of strengthening our witness to the world.

How's that unity thing coming? At last count, there are over 37,000 distinct Christian denominations in the world, plus hundreds of thousands of independent churches. Facing conflict from the world is one thing, but it is downright devastating to face hostility and opposition from people who are supposed to be your allies in this thing. Now we might, despite wishing otherwise, expect some friction with our neighbouring churches, but what about the friction inside the fellowship itself.

It is downright demoralizing. And quite frankly we are not always sure what the conflict in denominations is all about. There was a man whose faithful old dog died, so he took him to the nearest church which happened to be a Baptist one and asked the minister if he could hold a short service for his departed pet. "But you can't do that sort of thing!" the Pastor protested.

"Well, the dog has been such a good friend to me," said the man, "That he seems almost human, and it seems only proper to me that he should be given a Christian burial. How about it?" The preacher genuinely felt sorry for the man. He scratched his head a moment and then said; "I can't see myself doing it, but maybe if you went to see some other church in town-there is another in the next block-maybe they would oblige you."

"Oh, you think they would?" said the man feeling much better. "Look, can you tell me," he said confidentially, "I've got fifty dollars here. Do you think that would be enough to offer them for a short service?" "Now hold on a minute," said the minister, "you didn't tell me your dog was a Baptist..." (Let There be Laughter, p. 21) It is funny how our denominationalism can be so easily set aside when it is of some benefit to us.

Unity is elusive it seems, even with Jesus' intercessory prayer. Jesus' point though is that the world is hard enough to cope with as one of his followers, that we will need each other, and the more unified we are, the stronger we become in our witness. So, it seems there were two major challenges facing the disciples and in turn, you and I, but why does Jesus pray about them now, so publicly?

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Something prompted this prayer in John 17. The answer occurs in verse 13. Jesus is on the eve of his arrest and crucifixion. He is getting very close to the time he will ascend and return to the Father. It is of great concern to Jesus as to how well the disciples deal with his Ascension, and the possible sense of abandonment they are likely to feel after Jesus returns to heaven.

Out of his love and concern for his disciples, he turns their care over to the Father. Jesus trusts God the Father fully to care for us. Part of that wonderful care is of course the promise and gift of the Holy Spirit. As Christ Jesus successfully preserved his disciples, except as he mentions Judas, God through his Holy Spirit seeks to preserve us. To keep us true until the time we ascend into the house of many mansions.

John wrote in his first letter that “God is love”. In other words, God is defined by love, and we love because he first loved us. And one of the things that love seems to compel in us and it seems in God is oversight of the beloved. I think we can understand this. As parents we walk a fine line between watching our children and smothering them. As babies we are expected and desire to keep an eye on them twenty-four seven.

However, as our children grow and mature, they seek more independence. They spend more and more time away from the nest, so to speak. It can eat at us so that we cannot watch them twenty-four hours a day anymore. And even when they eventually leave the nest entirely, we never cease being concerned about their safety and well-being. The only place we seem to be able to let our guard down, even for a moment, is where?

At home. Our love compels us to watch over those we love. The same thing occurs; I believe with God. His love compels him to watch over us. The good news is that he can watch over us all the time, no matter where we are. Jesus said, “Lo, I am with you, even until the end of the age.” And the ultimate place of security for all of us is where? Home with God. Heaven, if you will.

Jesus’ prayer is one of promise. That God through the Holy Spirit will always be with us. His prayer is also a warning, that following Christ is not an easy path. The world is a difficult place to navigate when you are trying to stick to the “path of righteousness”. Yet, as hard as the struggle may be, we are never alone, nor are we outside of God’s love. We need to stop listening to the lie that we are unloved and alone.

J.I. Packer in his book, *Knowing God*, sums this train of thought very neatly when he writes, *What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—that He knows me. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of His mind. All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me.*

*I know Him because he first knew me and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when His care falters.*

*This is momentous knowledge.*

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*This is unspeakable comfort...in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that His love is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion Him about me, in the way I am so disillusioned about myself, and quench His determination to bless me. (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p. 236)*

How can we believe, even for a moment, that we are not loved? How can we doubt his grace and mercy? Our God, who knows everything about you, good or bad: and still loves you, and still blesses you, and still watches over you. No wonder the hymn writer exclaims, "Halleluiah, what a Saviour!"