

I am not particularly fond of graduations, except for high school and college, which make sense to me. I've never seen the purpose of others – pre-K, middle school, and the like. However, my perspective changed recently as I attended three pre-k graduations.

I'm starting to get it. Before becoming a parent and soon-to-be parent of two, these occasions seemed cute, a parade of adorableness at best. But when you have a child or if someone close to you is going through that experience, you can't help but 'get the feels'.

Here's what I've come to appreciate: Graduations, in any form, are significant at every step of the way. They acknowledge milestones, growth, and most importantly, they remind us that the time we have been given is precious. Each moment – *this moment* is unique and will never happen again. We must seize every opportunity to celebrate, even if it may seem cheesy but especially when it's cute.

While not a graduation in the strictest sense, John 17 carries a similar sentiment.

John 17 is one of my favorite chapters in all of Scripture. It not only contains profound theological thoughts, but it also exudes an unparalleled intimacy.

At first glance, you may not fully grasp its significance, but John 17 is a prayer. It is the prayer that Jesus offers for His disciples and, by extension, for us.

This prayer is special not only because it provides encouragement, protection, and the call to trust in God, but also because of when it takes place.

John 17 occurs the night before the crucifixion. Up until this point, we have witnessed all the signs and revelations of God's glory, affirming that Jesus is indeed God. We have experienced John's version of the last supper, where Jesus washed the disciples' feet, teaching them about servanthood and setting an example for how they should act.

But now, in this passage, Jesus reveals to the disciples that He is going to a place they cannot follow—at least not immediately. He informs them of His departure, and because of that, they will have to figure things out.

In short - the training wheels are coming off.

Although we haven't reached that stage with Evelyn yet, training wheels. At their core training wheels build confidence and stability, quite literally. And when they are gone – they act as a reminder of growth.

We can imagine ourselves in the shoes of the disciples. I can understand the shock they must have felt upon hearing this revelation. Simultaneously, it presented an opportunity for them to put into practice all they had been taught.

What John 17 reveals is that even though the training wheels are off, even though it's time for the disciples to apply what they have learned, they will not be left alone. They will be given a guide, an advocate—the Holy Spirit.

In fact, John 17 serves as a precursor to Pentecost.

But before we delve into Pentecost, let's focus on this prayer.

It's a shame that the entire prayer is not included in the lectionary. We only have 11 verses for today, which is roughly half of it. The prayer consists of 26 verses, nevertheless, let me share with you what I find in this prayer.

The first theme that stands out to me is encouragement.

Perhaps you have been in a situation like this before. Let me share my own experience.

During my clinical hours to become a pastor, I worked in a trauma center, specifically in a step-down unit and an ICU floor. The ICU floor was filled with either joy or sorrow, with no in-between. I vividly remember a patient who had been on the floor for about a month. Sometimes, I would go in and pray with them, and other times I would be present when their family was there.

I recall a passage of time and the patient's condition worsening, resulting in a poor prognosis.

I visited the family. They shared the news with me. I didn't quite know how to react, and the sadness was evident.

Apparently, I didn't conceal my emotions well because those two individuals offered to pray for me. We held hands, and instead of praying for the dying person, they perceived my loss for words and saw me as a young adult still learning about life.

They prayed for *me*.

From time to time, I reflect on that experience as a source of encouragement for myself. It reminds me that I don't always need to have the right words and that the spirit can work through anyone, even when I hold the role of a pastor.

What transpired on that day in the ICU floor draws parallels to John 17.

Jesus was praying for the disciples, who didn't know what to expect and were at a loss for words, yet Jesus offered prayers for them. This serves as a great source of encouragement, demonstrating that even when someone is at their lowest, they are still capable of sharing God's love.

It is truly amazing; it exemplifies Christ.

The second theme derived from this prayer is protection.

While the disciples and our circumstances differ, the disciples required physical protection. They were not well-liked individuals; they were outsiders and essentially enemies of the state. People were actively searching for them. Although that doesn't precisely align with our present moment, we can still appreciate God's protection in a different sense.

When I contemplate being protected by God, I think on the means of grace.

I think of baptism, communion, and the forgiveness of sins.

I ponder the things that keep me in God's grace.

I find these to be more powerful than any physical protection I could receive. At least, that's how I perceive it. For me, protection isn't primarily a physical aspect. Regardless of whether I want to admit it, my body will eventually deteriorate – the physical will wilt. What truly matters to me is the assurance that God will be present when difficult times arise.

This prayer offers some solace in that regard. Through Jesus's words, we learn that while He was present in the world, He protected the disciples. Now, as He prepares to depart, He is passing on the baton, so to speak.

Lastly, the final theme is trust.

As we read these 26 verses, an undeniable sense of intimacy between Jesus and God the Father permeates through. We may not fully comprehend the intricacies of their relationship, but we understand that they are somehow one, distinct yet unified.

It makes complete sense, right?

Well, I'm only half-joking. If we were to fully grasp the relationship between God the Father and Jesus, we might be like God. However, in the absence of complete certainty, this prayer assures us that these two entities operate in similar ways. Because God the Father protected Jesus, and Jesus protected the disciples, we too are protected.

This requires a certain level of trust, doesn't it?

Likewise, trust is integral to the means of grace. We trust that through baptism, we are saved. We trust that through communion, our sins are forgiven. We trust that through the forgiveness of our sins, we find resolution.

And what else is trust but faith?

I know I emphasize this a lot, but the third article of the creed is incredibly important to the Lutheran faith and our understanding of God, particularly regarding how we trust God.

As I've mentioned before, the third article of the creed teaches us that it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we come to have faith in Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is the Holy Spirit who keeps us in faith, makes us holy - in other words, sanctified.

We place our trust in the relationship between Jesus and God the Father, which assures us that God's presence is with us in times of trouble, in moments of joy, and even when we experience sorrow. It's all about the dynamics of this relationship.

Here's why I trust. In verse 20, Jesus says:

"I ask not only on behalf of these disciples, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

There's a lot to unpack in this statement, but Jesus's words convey that because we have heard the good news and have received the Holy Spirit, we are included just like the disciples. We are

empowered to demonstrate God's love, and what's more, we are invited to share in the intimate relationship between Jesus and God the Father.

It's almost beyond comprehension.

Last week I talked about the night sky, I mentioned how it's easier to focus on the darkness rather than the stars, on the bad rather than the good. However, this week, we receive nothing but good news.

Today marks the Seventh Sunday after Easter and the celebration of the Ascension of our Lord. Throughout the church year, there are certain events that rarely or never coincide with a Sunday. This is one of those Sundays. I believe it's significant to bring together the seventh Sunday of Easter and the Ascension because the present passage from John 17 provides a deeper understanding of the ascension.

The ascension of our Lord occurs just before Pentecost, right before the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples, empowering them to proclaim the good news to the world. However, before that happens, we are presented with a challenge and a reminder.

Our lesson from Acts serves as a case study.

After Jesus returns and appears to the disciples, He ascends into heaven. As He ascends, two disciples gaze up at the heavens, seemingly watching Jesus disappear into the distance.

During this moment, two men in white robes approach the disciples and ask, in essence, why are you looking up at the heavens?

This question may initially seem mundane or obvious, but I view it as a challenge. There's something deeper behind it.

These passages are meaningful to me because they remind me that while it's important to direct our gaze upward to the risen Lord, we must also look down. We need to remember to look around us because of the one who has risen. As Christians, it is our calling to care for those around us, knowing that God cares for us.

May we be challenged to occasionally look down in order to see those who are near us – in need. As disciples of Jesus, we are equipped with all the tools we need and we have the Holy Spirit as our advocate, guiding us.

On this unique day, a day we will never experience again, let us treasure the gift of life, the chance to love in every moment. May we always remember that we are deeply loved, surpassing all measure, and that we have a Savior who intercedes for us in prayer. And above all things, because Christ has risen, we are empowered to love.

Amen.