Sermon, May 12, 2024
"Jesus Prayed for his Disciples"
Seventh Sunday of Easter,
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

By now it's one of the most well-known murals in the world. It's certainly one of the most distinctive features on the landscape of South Bend, Indiana. The mural was completed in 1964 and the artist was Millard Sheets. It's purpose was to cover one wall of the new library just constructed at the University of Notre Dame. The artwork depicts a procession of figures selected from different centuries and places to convey the concept of the Church's historical continuity. It starts at the bottom with the early Greek philosophers, moves to the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament writers, the early Church Fathers, and then the great medieval and Renasissance thinkers. At the top of the procession the central figure is the resurrected Jesus Christ, conceived as the great teacher and master, and the fountain of knowledge contained in the library. It's called the "Word of Life" The mural's title comes from the opening passage in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God". Except, except, that's not how it's best known.

Because the mural is visible from one end of the football stadium and because Jesus' pose resembles that of a referee signaling a touchdown, the mural is much more known in popular jargon as "Touchdown Jesus" Not surprising because what's more popular today, going to church or watching football? Nearly 124 million viewers turned in to the Super Bowl this past February while on the average Sunday it is estimated that maybe 70 million adults attend church services on any given Sunday. Sounds like Touchdown Jesus has at least a two touchdown lead going into the fourth quarter.

I've introduced this mural because it seems to depict the theme of this Sunday and the gospel we just heard. On the Seventh Sunday after Easter, the Gospel passage in all three lectionary years is taken from the seventeenth chapter of John's gospel known as the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus. On the night before his death, Jesus prayed for the protection, unity, and joy of the disciples as he prepared to leave this world to go to the Father. And I think there is an excellent correlation with the mural. With his outstretched arms, it is not six points Jesus is signalling but he is gathering up the great thinkers of the ages with himself as supreme teacher, he is gathering his arms to enfold and protect as the Good Shepherd, and his arms emphasize the invitation to share fellowship, *koinonia*, with the Lord Jesus Christ in the Kingdom.

These first three weekends of May are normal commencement weekends in many of our colleges and universities. It's time to name the valedictorian, pass out the summa and magna cum laudes and give the final grades. And it was a light semester only three courses to evaluate how Jesus' prayer is doing: protection, unity and joy.

So how are we doing with unity? I heard a highly audible gasp last Sunday when during adult discussion I let everyone know that there are some 40,000 different Christian denominations. Is this a bad thing? Let's compare it to a restaurant. If you went to a restaurant and there was only one meal on the menu, you might be really happy if it was something you really liked but otherwise you might be quite disappointed. But would you really want 40,000 choices? You might be overwhelmed and starve before you finish reading the menu. So some variety in style of worship, style of music, priorities for outreach and need for evangelism in our Christian churches might be welcome but should they be dealbreakers that keep us so separate from one another? Jesus' prayer, "that they may be one" still haunts as well as inspires. It is wearisome, deadly wearisome, to endure church battles that split not once but repeatedly. Want to do something to improve the grade? Pledge to attend at least one ecumenical event in the rest of the year.

Next class – protection - how are we doing? In an outpouring of words and emotions, Jesus asks God to do for his friends what he himself can no longer do. To be for them in spirit what he can no longer be for them in body. "Protect them," Jesus prays. "Protect them by your name." "Protect them from the evil one." Protect them so that they can know unity, joy, and truth. Protect them". This Jesus may be less familiar - the vulnerable one who does the single hardest thing a friend, a lover, a spouse, a parent, a child, a teacher, a pastor ever does? Sends his cherished ones into a treacherous world on nothing but a hope and a prayer? St. Paul describes his trials: *Five times I received forty lashes minus one, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.*

If this was protection, Paul might need a new insurance plan. But wait before we give a grade, let's get to the last course, joy. When Paul appeared in front of King Agrippa after being arrested in Jerusalem, his confession wasn't that he was sad, mad, mistreated or a victim of any kind. His confession was, I THINK MYSELF HAPPY!

Most people think that happiness is what happens to you when good things happen in your life. It's not what happens to you that determines your happiness, it's your answer to what happens to you that determines your happiness!

Jesus today prays for our unity, prays for our protection, prays for our joy. We're not there yet. No cap and gown, perhaps some remedial education. Oh well. And what are we left with? What Jesus was left with at the end, prayer. Can we feel as compelled to pray as Jesus felt compelled on the night of the Last Supper. Can prayer be as fundamental as breathing, eating, walking? Can it be part of who we are to the extent we can't not do it.

My prayer for us is that we will trust in the Spirit and trust in the power of prayer. The Spirit blows where it wills and stay open to the Spirit. And don't forget to pray. Pray more. Pray together. Pray by yourself. Try different forms of prayer. Ask because Jesus asked. Grow in faith. Grow in love. Amen.