

sermon-5/4/08 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Revealing God”  
John 17:1-11

Some of you may remember Archbishop Oscar Romero from Central America. He was assassinated in 1980 because of his work for justice among the poor in El Salvador. Right before he was shot, he was speaking at a worship service. Here is what he said:

“We know that every effort to improve society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses, wants and demands. We have the security of knowing that what we plant, if nourished with Christian hope, will never fail. This holy Mass, this eucharist, is clearly an act of faith. This body broken and blood shed for human beings encourages us to give our body and blood up to suffering and pain, as Christ did-not for self, but to bring justice and peace to our people. Let us be intimately united in faith and hope at this moment.”

It was right at that point that guns were heard in the sanctuary taking his life. It must have been an incredibly poignant and sad moment. His people clung to those last words from his heart.

When we read our John text, the author is trying to help his community, some 70 years after the death of Jesus, hear Jesus’ last words to his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. It, too, is a very touching, poignant moment.

We, too, can feel the power of this moment 2,000 years later. This prayer at the Last Supper, called Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, is also a prayer for us. If we were to read further in chapter 17, we would see we are included in the prayer when Jesus prays for those who will believe in him because of the message of those first disciples. That’s us. We listen, then, with a sense of privilege to Jesus’ prayer for us.

What can we glean from this long-ago prayer that might be relevant to our lives today? I want to focus on a couple of things that beg for our attention. The first is Jesus’ definition of eternal life in the fourth gospel. It is quite unique. Let’s read it again. “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

For John, eternal life is not about some future reward in heaven. It is, as you have heard in other sermons, a reality we experience right here on earth. One commentator I read put it very clearly. “Eternal life for John is less about lengthening the duration of one’s life. . and more about participating in God’s eternal love and thus radically transforming life.”

While many of us hope for a life in heaven after we die, this idea about eternal life is intriguing. I, in no way, want to dismiss the hope of life after death in heaven. That is a deep hope that is sacred to many of us. However, there is not much to say about that since we have not heard from anyone who has been in heaven.

But we can say a good deal about participating in God's life while we live on earth. That is a reality we can share with each other. When we give our best energies to knowing God, in Christ, we enter into the power of love that can transform everything. Remember, "knowing," Biblically speaking, is about intimacy, about sharing on a deep level, and not just intellectually knowing some facts.

Jesus is praying that we open ourselves to the gift of knowing God. It is a gift, to be sure because it is something that is given. We don't earn it. But, in order to receive any gift, we must open our hands, our hearts, and our minds to receive it. Much of the spiritual work we do on this earth is learning how to open ourselves to receive the gifts God wants to give us.

The next thing in this prayer that jumps out at us concerns the word "glory." This is a big word for the gospel of John. It occurs 42 times in the gospel. Of those 42 times, eight are in chapter 17 alone! What does Jesus mean by glory, glorify, glorified? It sounds like some holy, religious jargon. It is very hard to pin down into anything concrete.

Scholars tell us glory can refer to honoring someone. Jesus honored God by how he lived. We, too, as the body of Christ, can honor God by how we live. That is easy enough to understand, however hard it is to do.

But scholars tell us there is another meaning to this word glory. It can mean to reveal the true nature of someone. Thus Jesus glorified God, or revealed the true nature of God by his actions, particularly his sacrificial love that ended on the cross.

Today we say we know about the depths of God's love for us because we have seen it revealed in Jesus who loved us even when it hurt him. It is the power of that love that saves us, makes us whole. That is the most persuasive understanding of the cross for me at this time in my life.

Jesus said he glorified God in the work he was given to do. As we know, that work involved speaking out and showing God's inclusive love in his actions, in his bursting the bubbles of those in power who abused that power, and in his healing those who were broken in body, mind, or spirit.

It must have felt good for Jesus to know he finished the work he was given to do. Most of us would love to say the same thing about our life when we come to the end of it. Of course, that depends on our knowing what work we have been given to do.

An important question we might ask ourselves is: What is the work God has given me to do that by my doing it, God is glorified, that the nature of God, in other words, is revealed in my work? We can ask that question as a church and as individuals.

What work has Newport been given to do that reveals God to our community? That question ought to be primary in the minds of the leadership of this church, our session. It

ought to guide the decisions we make as a church, where we put our money, what we ask our staff to do, how, and to what, we call volunteers to serve.

Individually that becomes an interesting question as well. Am I revealing God's nature in how I spend my time at work? in my free time? Am I spending my best energy on transforming the world by how I love? What would need to change in order to organize my life to answer that question affirmatively?

This is a question we need to ask no matter what age we are. We never come to a point in life where we can retire from glorifying God. Joan Chittister, who was recently in Seattle and spoke at First Baptist Church, quoted the Talmud on this. The Talmud is one of the commentaries on the Jewish scriptures. She said the Talmud says, "If you want to know if your work in life is done and you are still alive-it isn't."

So, if you are still breathing, this call to glorify God is still part of your job description! And the only way we can keep at this work is to be nourished by God. That is why we come to the table in worship. This meal is where we experience the real presence of God in Christ. It is the meal that reminds us of that meal long ago when Jesus prayed the prayer we have been studying today. May our sharing in this meal remind us of Jesus' prayer for us long ago. May it focus our knowing. May it fortify us for the work that lies ahead. Amen