

Sermon: All the Way to Heaven is Heaven  
7 Easter, Year C  
John 17:20-26

Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Staunton  
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One of the best metaphors for the journey of the spiritual life is the river. Last weekend, my husband Steve and I canoed down a stretch of the Rockfish River in Nelson County. We have done this many times before but one thing that made this trip a little different was that we didn't tump over, even once. Some of you probably know that word "tump." It might not be in your dictionary though. It is a combination of turn-over and dump, I suppose. In my newish dictionary, it says it is a "chiefly southern U.S. expression." Anyway it was nice for a change not to lose anything that had fallen out of the boat into the river.

The stretch we canoed had some rapids and then some lovely, very calm parts where, if we got very quiet we would occasionally hear little trickles of water. Turning toward the trickly sound we could see a little stream entering the larger river. These streams of various sizes appeared all along the way. Our end point was where the Rockfish River empties into the James River. And as we all know the James River empties into the (Chesapeake Bay), which empties into the (Atlantic Ocean). One could think of all of these streams and rivers as our spiritual journey with God, and the ocean, where all of those streams and rivers come together, as our end point, our final, heavenly destination.

Our reading from John's Gospel for today is part of a *long* prayer. Jesus is praying for the disciples who are gathered together with him as he prepares to be crucified. You could say that these are some of his final words to them, that express some of his deepest desires for them, as he prays to the Father. His is a plea that his disciples all come together, a plea for unity. Jesus prays, "so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one." And Jesus is concerned also for the world. When the writer John refers to the *world*, he is not talking about God's creation but the human world that has rejected God and rejected Jesus. And Jesus is clear that the disciples living in unity with each other is THE BEST way that the rest of the world will know about God and Jesus. God, the Father, is in Jesus. Jesus is in the Father. Jesus is in the disciples. The unity within the Divine is to provide the motive for the rest of the world's belief.

How Christians treat each other is and has been observed by the rest of the world, for good or for ill. It's too easy to think of all the ways historically we haven't done so well. During the Roman Empire, the early church certainly had its share of discord. In parts of Europe much blood was shed in conflicts between Catholics and Protestants for long stretches of our history. And in America many white Christian slave owners erroneously used their Christian faith to justify owning black Christian slaves. Currently many of us Christians too easily get it wrong when we use our faith to justify injustice to those who, we think, are not like us.

But in John's prayer, Jesus describes a picture where the world would know of God's love because of Christian believers' love for one another. He expects the world to actually be a better place because of his having been there. And the really challenging thing is he expects

the world to be better because Christians are in it! And it will be how we love one another that can change the world.

Last week the Emmanuel vestry met and had what I would describe as a beautiful meeting. Now some vestry members might be wondering why I would describe it as beautiful because on one level, some could have described it as ordinary, maybe even at times, as a bit (yawn) boring. But on the relational level, it was extraordinary and I will tell you why. One member began in prayer – not from a book! But from her heart, with her own words, so it was *prayerful*. Then she led us in a short Bible study on the fruits of the Spirit (Love, joy, peace, gentleness, self-control, etc.), so it was *biblical*. The group was serious enough; members were trying to be careful with the church's resources, its money and mission. They listened to each other. They were considerate and kind. They were willing to take risks (We authorized spending a bundle for roof and gutter repairs – yes, you'll be receiving a letter about it asking for your help later this month!).

They enjoyed each other's company and fellowship. They displayed a great sense of humor; there was much laughter. They were *playful*. When we went on too long on any one topic, the senior warden kept us on task. It was *orderly*. Opinions were sought from the quiet ones. They were open to new information, new ideas; they were *engaged*. Willing to ask questions. "So and so, what do you think?" One member answered that question, "I think I am TIRED!" They were *honest*. They were willing to work hard. They were *responsible*. When one had not come to the meeting prepared with his report, he apologized and the rest were *merciful*! They were not territorial but were *deferential*. Best of all, they were *loving* and *unified*. I am sure we didn't agree on everything but there was a strong, underlying sense that *we're all in this together*. The streams had come together.

I don't think many folks traditionally look forward to vestry meetings. But this one was remarkable because I think it represents what Jesus was praying about, that we "be as one." In all realms of life, when we are unified and loving, we experience the eternal life of God here and now, and that will help the world to know the love of God.

Like the streams leading into the river and the river leading into the ocean, our life in God is constantly moving toward unity with others and with God. As writer Gerard Sloyan said, "All the way to heaven is heaven."<sup>1</sup> The God of love is here and now. Can you, right now, imagine Jesus interceding for you? Praying that you will grow in love, and that you will know that there is no one outside the realm of his love. And as you move on downstream, your heart, just like the river, gets wider and wider. Can you imagine Jesus praying for Emmanuel Church? What or whom will we find downstream whose lives will join with ours as someone new to love or be in unity with? Treasure awaits if we are willing to float along God's streams of mercy and love. All the way to heaven is heaven. Can we sense it in our midst?

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sloyan Gerard, Interpretation: John, p. 199.