

7th Sunday after Easter**Senior Preacher: Nicole Wallace****Text: John 17: 6–19****May 12, 2024**

I first came to LCM as a freshman in 2019, which feels like ages ago, and it kind of was. When I arrived at Northwestern, everything was scary, but also new and exciting. I had moved from Wisconsin, which is only an hour and a half away, but it felt like I had moved to a whole other world. I was in a new place, with new faces, an overwhelming amount of options for classes and extracurriculars, and was on my own for the first time in my life. Luckily, I found a community quickly here at LCMNU, where I was welcomed with open arms and smiling faces at the back-to-school barbecue. Everything felt like it was falling right into place. I was making friends, I was performing weekly on the football field with the marching band, and I was doing well in school. And then, all of the sudden, in March of 2020 panic descended over this campus and our world. In just a few short days, I went from hanging out with friends on the lakefill to frantically trying to pack up my dorm room at midnight, calling my mom to come pick me up before the state shut down. I'm sure many of you had very similar experiences. Overnight, our world became infinitely smaller. All the connections I had begun to forge felt as if they disappeared as soon as I returned home.

Suddenly, we were confined to the four walls of our homes, stuck with only a small handful of family members or friends. Covid seemed to shrink our world, yet through the isolation and quarantine, a oneness seemed to connect us like it never had before. Although we couldn't be with each other in person, maintaining connections between friends, family, neighbors, classmates, through texts, calls, and emails became incredibly important. During this time, we, as a human race, developed a new understanding of oneness and of unity, in which we had to constantly be aware of others and our physical relations to them. We came to understand community care in a different way that demonstrated that everyone needed to participate in neighborly love to stop the spread of disease and save lives. This oneness that I speak of, that I felt developing in our world during the pandemic, is the same oneness that is demonstrated in John 17. As Jesus is praying for his disciples, he is praying for a unity, the creation of a oneness between God, Son, and disciple. Jesus prays, "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17: 20–21). Jesus is praying for a connection to be forged and strengthened between God and creation. Not only this, but Jesus calls upon this connection during a time of great uncertainty as he was preparing the disciples for a world without his physical presence. When we were in a time of great uncertainty during the pandemic, and now with global conflicts and humanitarian crises wreaking havoc on our world, we are drawn into this oneness. Oneness with God is the same as oneness with all. Jesus taught us to love neighbor, and the unity created between us and God ensures that neighbor refers to everyone. In unpredictable, unstable times, such as these, Jesus invites us to find this connection between God, ourselves, and neighbor, reassuring us that strength and protection will be with us when we unite as one. We are called to love one another as God has loved us.

The next point I want to highlight in this passage from John is the fact that this is a prayer, given by Jesus, the *Son of God*, for his disciples. *God* is praying for his disciples, for us, to prepare them for a world without him. How radical is this love God has for us, that not only did His Son enter the world to die for our sins, but is also standing in front of his disciples, not

being prayed to, but he himself is praying for those called to serve him? Jesus not only speaks of a unification between God and creation, but also flips a power hierarchy completely on its head. In praying for the safety and glory of his disciples, Jesus demonstrates the love he has for each of his followers, bringing this idea of oneness and connection with God to the forefront. Just think about how amazing this is! How often do we think about our God as being the one praying for us? Usually when we think about an almighty, powerful being, we imagine them as being the one always worshiped and prayed to. It is difficult to imagine a powerful leader stooping down to the level of their constituents. Yet here, as Jesus prays for his disciples, we see God come down to our level. God is standing next to his disciples, in the flesh, praying that they may be watched over as He prepares to be crucified. This passage is so reassuring for me. In times of distress, anguish, hopelessness, and vulnerability, I am reminded that there is not only a vertical relationship that exists between God and I, but also a horizontal connection that exists. God comes down to us to meet us where we are at. In fact, Jesus prays “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified” (John 17: 18–19). He has been in the same place as us; he has walked in the shoes of his disciples and he asks God to sanctify their footsteps. Jesus prays to make us, his disciples, holy, just as he had been made holy. Again, we see this oneness inviting us into community, discipleship, and sanctity.

The last piece of this prayer that really stands out to me is Jesus’s call to keep us in this world. He prays to God, “my prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it” (John 17: 15–16). This part of his prayer is especially important for us to listen to. There have been so many times in my past four years that I wished I had a fast-forward button, or a skip button in my life. For example, when Covid hit, I honestly thought the world was going to end. Our mental health was deteriorating, we were watching people suffer daily, and for a short while it felt like there was nothing we could do. At least for me, I felt hopeless. If I had had a fast-forward button, I would have pressed it as fast as humanly possible to make the pain and suffering go away, to skip over the hard parts in life. Unfortunately, this button doesn’t exist. We remain in the world with all of the pain, suffering, misfortune, and evil that plagues it. And it’s not even just that we exist with these hardships, but that we are actually called to remain in the world, alongside these struggles. Here, Jesus explicitly prays that God not take us out of the world, but keeps us in it and protects us from evil and sin. God doesn’t just offer us the easy way out. Instead, He reassures us that He will stand by us and protect us throughout our duration on Earth as we spread His love and word.

Our LCMNU president, Michael, in his panel talk for the showcase last weekend, discussed how as Lutherans we are each called to be a “little Christ”. Our vocation as children of God is to spread God’s message of love, hope, and salvation to everyone we cross paths with. And more than that, we are called to remain in this world to carry on the work that Jesus started. In coming to Earth, Jesus united us as one people, forged a direct connection between God and us, and taught us how to care for the most marginalized and vulnerable in our communities. Being a “little Christ” means continuing the care for all that Jesus exemplified in his time on earth, of caring for all of creation, every human, animal, and our planet as a whole. In caring for creation, we recognize that we are all irrevocably connected and have a God-given responsibility to maintain this oneness. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to sit in the discomfort of daily living and are gifted with the protection and sanctity needed to persevere. With the gift of unity to God, we can share God’s gift with all our neighbors so that they may be blessed and cared for

as we are. There is no fast forward button that we can press to escape the aches and pains that inevitably come with being human, but we have the privilege of knowing God's love and can use this love to ease the suffering of others.