

C Easter 7 6.2.19

John 17:20-26

Focus Statement: Jesus is with/in us.

Last week I was swimming at the Y. Not the time with the scuba class, for those following along on Facebook, but a different time. Anyway, the guy in the lane next to me was doing this really strange stroke where he was sitting cross-legged in the water with his head up, perfectly straight, almost like he was meditating, moving his arms in like a sculling motion to pull himself across the pool. It looked hard and, well, weird. But I knew the guy is a swim coach and a pretty serious swimmer, so I knew there had to be a reason for it. So when he got back to the end of the lane, I asked him what was the point of that.

“It’s to get used to the feeling of my arms gripping the water,” he explained. “By moving my arms like this, I get used to the feeling of using my whole arm to move myself through the water, not just my hand. Swimming is very technical; it’s all about building up the neuropathways in your brain to create muscle memory. The goal is to do something again and again, to lay down the pathways so that when you’re fatigued and your mind wants to shut down, your body will be able to take over and just know what to do.”

Muscle memory is a funny thing. We can do a thing so many times that our bodies just take over and our minds sort of shut down. I’m guessing it’s not just me that’s had the experience of trying to go somewhere different via a route we take to go somewhere familiar, and ending up at the wrong place because repetition takes over. This is a very millennial experience, but several years ago a friend and I hauled out an old Nintendo 64 from her basement, and discovered we still knew every hidden bonus in Mario 64. One of

us would be playing, and would suddenly pause, turn sharply, and disappear into where what looked like solid wall was really where an extra life, or bonus coins, or a secret passageway was hidden. “How did you know that was there?” “I don’t know, my hands just automatically turned the controller there.” My piano teacher’s insistence that practicing scales over and over would teach my fingers to remember turned out to be true not with piano keys but with mid-nineties video games.

I was thinking about my swimming friend’s comments about repetitive motion and building up muscle memory this week with our Gospel text for this morning. Because I’ll tell you, the first time I read it, I thought, this is going to be a beast to memorize! And, I won’t lie to you, it was. Stories are easy, there’s a logical narrative flow to follow. But the teachings of Jesus, and especially ones like this morning’s, where he seems to just be repetitively rambling on and on, those are hard. But what I got from the effort was this sense of the indwelling relationship between Jesus, the Father, and us. All the I in you and you in me and them in us, your glory is my glory is their glory, over and over and over again started to lay in my mind the pathways not of understanding, but of promise. Jesus and the Father are in each other, and through Jesus’ resurrection and ascension we too are a part of that entwined relationship.

I think that setting down this muscle memory of promise within the disciples to sustain them when they could no sustain themselves is exactly what Jesus was trying to do here. What we read this morning, John chapter seventeen, verses twenty through twenty-six is the very end of the Farewell Discourse, Jesus’ very last words to his disciples before they

enter into the Passion. Remember how the Gospel on Good Friday starts, “After Jesus had spoken these words, he went with his disciples... to a place where there was a garden.” The “these words,” they’re these words. The words we read this morning. The words that end: “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” Jesus said that, and then he made that love known to them at the cross. This Farewell Discourse we’ve been reading these past few weeks, like I’ve said, I definitely encourage you to sit down and read if you like a good love letter. Because what these four chapters are is a love letter from Jesus to his disciples in the final moments before his death. John chapters fourteen through seventeen are beautiful and poetic and powerful, and, let’s face it, very very repetitive. I think because Jesus wanted to take the last time he had to try one last time to drum into the disciples minds the promise that they were his, that they were loved, that he would never leave them, that they would never be alone.

And these promises are true not just for Jesus’ disciples, but for us. In John chapter seventeen Jesus is praying to the Father, asking that the Father be with them, guide them, protect them, and... Did you catch verse twenty? “I ask not only on behalf of these—the ones in the room, the ones who heard his prayer—but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.” Jesus was praying for those who did not yet believe, but who would. Friends, let me say this one more time, let me repeat it again and again, so that it builds muscle memory in your brain, on the night Jesus was betrayed, in the moments, literal moments before he went to the garden to be arrested, Jesus prayed for you. Jesus prayed that you would have peace, that you would know his glory, and, most importantly,

that you would be loved. Jesus died, resurrected, and ascended into heaven with you on his mind. Not because you believed, but before you believed. This is the love that Jesus has for you, the relationship that Jesus has created, is creating in you, with you, for you.

Christianity is a faith tradition that is based on belief. And I admit, I can get hung on up on the belief thing at times, at what it means to believe in Jesus, what specific beliefs are or are not required. But passages like this feel like belief is less head knowledge than it is heart knowledge. It is the motion that keeps us coming back to this place, it is the curiosity that drives our doubts and questions, it is the feeling we can't quite shake. I read somewhere that doubt and faith are twins, and I think it's because of this muscle memory of belief as heart knowledge. You have to believe to doubt. You have to believe to question. Not intellectually, maybe, but I think Jesus is that internal maybe that drives us to wonder what else could be out there.

Muscle memory is also why, if you come to me and tell me you've not been coming to church because you're struggling with your faith, I'm going to be inclined to encourage you to come to church. Not because church is some sort of magic faith making potion, Mother Teresa is reported to have doubted for most of her life, and she was in church a lot, but because I really believe the repetition of it is important. I believe we do this church thing for each other. I believe the act of going through the motions does indeed change us. It has been my experience that God gave me church to lay down those neuropathways of belief so deep within me that they're just there.

My grandmother, I think I've shared, developed dementia at the end of her life. Who I was, who my mom was, even who she was, those things faded away as the disease took more and more of her mind. I'll close with a quick story about Jesus as heart knowledge that I learned from watching her. I saw this first with her, but have since experienced countless times in my own ministry. Someone from her church came to bring her communion. My grandmother didn't recognize the woman, whom she'd known for forty years, but she was always amiable to visitors. Mary read the Gospel reading for the week, in the middle of which my grandmother stopped her. "Who's Jesus?" she asked. Mary stumbled a surprised answer, to which my grandmother calmly responded, "he seems like a nice man." Mary agreed, yes, Jesus was certainly a nice man. Then they got to the Lord's Prayer. And my grandmother, who couldn't tell you the name of the woman sitting next to her, what she had for lunch, or even her own name, immediately joined in, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

Dear friends in Christ, Jesus is in the Father, and the Father is in him, and you are in him, and he in you, and nothing, nothing can ever separate you from that relationship. I hope you believe that. I hope I can say it often enough, I hope you hear it often enough, that you believe that. Not with your mind, because minds fail, memories fade, we can't reason our way into this. I hope you believe it with the memory of repetition. Because here's the thing friends, here's the promise. Jesus is in you, with you, through you, already. You are God's. Amen.