

Texts: Acts 1:6-14, John 17:1-11

John 17 is often called the priestly prayer of Jesus. The prayer fills the entire chapter and it is placed between the parting words which Jesus gives his disciples and the betrayal by Judas and his arrest, which begin chapter 18. I just read the opening 11 verses of the 26-verse prayer. This is the traditional lectionary reading for the Sunday between the ascension of Jesus into heaven, 40 days after Easter, and Pentecost Sunday, 50 days after Easter.

Our reading from Acts started that ten-day period. Before Jesus ascended, he was asked, "So now, will you do what the Messiah is supposed to do and restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus did not say, "You guys **still** don't get it!" but instead said, "You don't get to know the timing and plan for God's rule. Hang tight. The Holy Spirit will empower you and craft you into witnesses to spread the news about me across the earth."

Then he left; went up to heaven. But he left them with that; left them with those words. On Pentecost, the Spirit will ignite a word explosion.

The brilliant poet, Jane Kenyon, wrote, "A poet's job is to find a name for everything: to be a fearless finder of the names of things." I see that job also applying to the preacher, who is charged to fearlessly find names of things. Basically, that's all I ever do; and the Spirit gives power to well-chosen words. I name hope when I see it; hurt and loss where I find them. When I discover an answer to prayer, I speak about it. Whenever I pray, I verbalize what I've heard beyond the words I've heard. I often name the gift of love.

In studying these opening verses of John 17, the verb "give" jumps off the page – give, gave, given – 11 times in 11 verses. As Jesus talked to God the Father, Jesus verbalized multiple givens, passed on, from Father to Son, from Son to people. In the divine parent-child relationship, as in healthy human relationships, the enlivening flow of giving and receiving is constantly at play. When you love someone, how important, how rich in meaning, how instinctive is giving. Our exchanges, our giving and receiving express love. Wouldn't she love this? I'd love to do this with him. We give our best, and receive the best, with those we love.

The prayer begins: "You gave him [the Son] authority over everyone so that he could give eternal life to everyone you gave him." It's a triple-header, the hat trick, three gives in one sentence. The Father's gift of authority to Jesus leads to the gift of eternal, deep, lasting life [zoe] to everyone the Father gifted to the Son. The interchange is gifted: "Here, receive deep, lasting life."

Next, Jesus glorified the Father on earth by "finishing the work you gave me to do." Not assigned; gave. I hear trust, empowerment. "I have revealed your name to the people you gave me from this world." Dale Bruner calls this group of people the second all. The first all is the whole world. The second all are the persons the Father gave to the Son.

Bruner names this gifted group the church. Good old Presbyterian predestination would call this the elect. These are gifted with zoe; deep, lasting life.

“They were yours and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.” The second all; the faithful church. “Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you.” Transparency; sources revealed. No secrets: direct flow from the Creator to Jesus to you!

The next verse with the verb “give” in it, I’m going to skip for now. Following that, the next one is: “I’m not praying for the world but for those you gave me, because they are yours.” The second all consumes the prayer list of Jesus. Finally, in verse 11: “watch over them in your name, the name you gave me, that they will be one just as we are one.” The God-given naming unifies and brings into harmony. The fearless finding of names solidifies the church.

Going back to the verse I skipped over, it comes after Jesus said of the second all, the church: “Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you.” Jesus prays, “This is because I gave them the words that you gave me, and they received them.” We are gifted with words, by the Word, Jesus. It’s a love exchange.

Sometimes, after a sermon, someone will ask me, “Have you been following me all week? From your sermon, it sounds like it.” Or, “What you spoke today, I’d heard that many times before, but this time I really heard it.” Those times when the prayer of confession hits home. Or, our prayer for joys and concerns overwhelms. Or it’s spoken in the words of a hymn or an anthem. “I gave them the words that you gave me, and they received them.” Something deep resonates, as the Word gifts us with words. It’s a love exchange.

Before I began to write this sermon, I read and responded to an email request from one of our winter visitors, requesting guidance about a family situation. I gave some words to her, words like: “The love of God in Jesus Christ is for all persons. You are in a position to make that love real and constant.” By the time I had finished typing out my first draft, she sent me a reply. She gave me words like: *Your advice is a blessing. I loved your statements, about being in a position to show Christ’s love for my loved one and believing the church should be a sanctuary and a safe, loving place. That blessed me deep in my soul. I should also like to express how much I love Holy Way and its people. I have said over and over I have never been in a more caring, loving congregation.*

We have been given; we are gifted. The Word became flesh and dwells among us. The Word still speaks saving love in words we speak. The love of Jesus Christ never stops giving. May we never stop being grateful.