

***#FaithStrong***  
***John 17:6-19***  
***16 May 2021***  
***sermon by Rev. Jessica McCrae***

Over the past several weeks we have seen the death count in India rise to heights we could never imagined. We have turned on the television and seen suffering on a level that is unfathomable. Having experienced our own covid challenges in Ontario, and especially in Peel, and not having a clear picture when this will all begin to wind down or when life will return to something resembling normal, is exhausting. Add to this the regular ebb and flow of life, the burdens and griefs that occur in our own lives,

the challenges we all face as life goes on in the midst of covid and we can sometimes wonder where God is for us. There are times when the world gets so turned upside down, when nothing makes sense and we feel so vulnerable, when fear threatens to take hold and suffocate us, when anger threatens to cloud our vision and we can sometimes, suddenly, feel very alone.

Our scripture today reminds us again that even when life seems to be falling apart, even when nothing is as it should be, even when we feel terribly alone, Christ is with us. We meet Jesus today deep in prayer, for his friends. He

knows his earthly time with them is drawing to a close and he knows that they are worried about this, and he knows that they question how they can find the strength to continue this ministry without his physical presence. He knows they are worried about how they will stay strong without Him beside them every day. So Jesus comes before God, praying for protection and guidance for his friends as they not only continue this mission and this ministry, but as they navigate their lives as people of faith in a world where evil exists, in a world that can hurt, and distract, and bring pain.

This gospel lesson today is about the prayer Jesus prayed for his friends but it is also about the prayers Jesus prays for us, a reminder for us that as we go about our lives, we are not alone. The Christ who walked with us, who journeyed all the way to the cross, who brought the hope of new life to us through his resurrection ... that same Christ, the friend that we talked about last week, he is with us still. This gospel lesson reminds us that as the weight of the world bears heavy against us, when griefs fill our hearts, when we wonder how we can continue, Jesus is with us, praying on our behalf

when we can not find the words, working on our behalf to bring comfort and new life when we are exhausted and in need of sabbath rest. When the world around us feels overwhelming and when we feel so very small, Christ is praying for us, praying on our behalf, that we might find the strength we need for another day.

“I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.”

As beloved children of God, for whom Christ intercedes, this gospel today helps us understand not only how we can survive in this troubled world in which we find ourselves, but

also how our eyes can be opened to grace. It invites us to notice the movements of God’s spirit around us and how we can thrive, even in uncertainty, and live to share a message of hope and love. Because we are not alone. And our Saviour, our Friend, is praying for us when we need it most.

There is something incredibly comforting in that, isn’t there? When life feels overwhelming, when we feel so powerless, there is something comforting knowing that Jesus is praying for us. But how do those prayers work to strengthen us, how do we move beyond thinking “that is

comforting” to being filled with strength from those prayers, filled with strength for this journey.

Well, all of our scriptures in the last few weeks have been pointing to that. It is about opening our hearts to this relationship with Christ. Over the last several weeks we have heard that Christ is our good shepherd, the true vine, and our friend. All of these descriptions have to do with relationship, with relationship in which we grow to trust, relationship which calls to be rooted in and deeply connected to Christ, the source of our life and our hope. When we nourish and strengthen this relationship we have,

we will begin to be able to find peace and some comfort even when life around us feels out of control. When we are rooted in this relationship we will begin to find that even when hope is elusive, even when we can't imagine a brighter day, we will be able to trust – to trust that God is working to bring about that brighter day, that Easter morning. And even when that brighter day is a long time off, we will grow to trust that even in that, we are held in the loving embrace of our eternal friend, especially then, when we are still in the darkness of grief, we are held in the embrace of God.

To is a reminder that we are not alone, that even though Christ is not physically present with us this day, He is our eternal advocate, working to bring hope and new life into our world. But today is also an invitation, an invitation to see past the pain and the darkness that can feel so present in our world right now and commit to rooting ourselves in the grace and love of Jesus. That is what will enable us to survive and even grow in faith and in hope, even in the midst of dark days; this is what will enable us to find hope and see a way forward even when we are heartbroken and questioning. As people of faith

we are rooted in something different, the love of Christ, and nothing in this world is stronger than that.

This passage reminds us today that we can live as an Easter people, as people of hope and love and compassion even when the world seems dark, because Jesus is with us, and for us, praying us into wholeness, loving us into new life. It means we can face another day living intentionally with love, and even some measure of hope, even when our world is turned upside down.

And it isn't always easy to do that, I know, which is why we need to make time to become "faith strong", it is why we need to connect with God, our redeemer, our Saviour, our source of love. It is why we need to pray. Because prayer makes us mindful of God's presence in our lives, makes us mindful of power stronger than darkness. It makes us mindful of others around us and the connections we share. Prayer connects us to a power of peace and love that we may never really understand. Prayer makes it so we can share our burdens and remember

we aren't alone, so that we can then get to work showing compassion and reflecting light.

As this pandemic continues, as we grieve for what was and as we struggle to regain connections we fear we have lost, when an ordinary day becomes a grief filled Good Friday, we need to pray, too. We need to feel ourselves anchored to love and hope, anchored to our true vine, embraced by our eternal friend, gathered into safety together by our good shepherd so we can help each other to heal.

That's what we're doing today, when we gather together but apart, we are beginning to

heal, we are remembering hope and we are standing together pointing to a love that is more powerful than any other force in this world. We are starting to heal, knowing that Christ is working on our behalf to bring new life. When we come together like this, today, acknowledging whatever pain is in our hearts, pointing to the risen Christ who overcame death, who overcame fear, who saw hope where everyone else only saw grief, we are anchoring ourselves to that true vine, and beginning to heal, and taking the first tentative steps toward becoming co-creators of a whole new beginning.

This is what it means to be strong, to be faith strong.

It doesn't mean we won't get frustrated, or fear, or worry. It doesn't even mean we won't have days when the grief and uncertainty feels stronger than us.

But when we abide in Christ, when we connect ourselves to the source of all life and all hope, the joy that can be received from being a part of **this**, from being a part of new beginnings and new life, we are a part of something more meaningful and more powerful than anything I can begin to imagine. I hope you feel it too. And

if you don't, well I hope that here, with this community, you'll get the chance to find out, I hope here in this community – together but apart - you will begin to heal, from all we have been through, from all YOU have been through. Because here, we will abide in Christ, we will pray, we do everything in Christ's name, and we will open ourselves to the Spirit who wants to be at work here – in our hearts, in our city - in and through us. We will find hope and we will find a way forward no matter what this world throws at us. I hope that here, in this community you will be able to find out why church is different from

anything else you can be a part of, how it can help you find peace, help you heal, and help you see a way forward.

Abide in me, said Jesus, root yourself in me and let me use you to reflect hope in this world. New life will come. Abide with me.