

SERMON: "RELEASING ANGELS"

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 17:1-11; 18

DATE: AUGUST 2, 2015

John 17:1-11; 18 (NIV)

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed:

"Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. ² For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. ³ Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ⁴ I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

⁶ "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. ⁸ For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ⁹ I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. ¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

Oscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, once looked ahead and said this about the future of the Church:

"It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own."

While his words pointed to the Church's future, Romero also was talking about the Church's past for what he said has always been true.

The foundation we build upon, as we look ahead, was the Church's future a hundred years ago. And the foundation of a hundred years ago was the future 500 years before it and so on and so on.

There is the truth that, in a very real way we, in the Church today, are linked with all the generations of Christians before us right back to the first disciples. We are the top story of a Church that is built upon the foundation of Christ and His first followers and has story after story---level after level---built up over 2000 years, each layered one upon another just like a gigantic skyscraper---but a skyscraper that is always under construction---always reaching higher.

We are building our own story for our children and grandchildren to base their Church upon.

And I use the word "story" intentionally with its double meaning. We are building a story and we are re-telling and re-living the story. We are working on, but not completing, the unfinished Church which will remain under construction until Christ's return.

Our Scripture lesson reminds us of the original foundation we all build the Church upon.

John 17 is a foundational kind of chapter. It has within it some of Jesus' most important prayers.

Our lesson includes Jesus praying for Himself.
It also encompasses some of His prayer for His disciples.

The Chapter concludes with the rest of Jesus' prayer for His disciples as well as adding His prayer for all the Christians who will commit themselves to Him in future generations.

This morning we want to concentrate on Christ's intercessions for the disciples---the ones who knew Him face to face and loved Him as the Messiah.

Jesus prayed about the disciples being given to Him by God. His followers were a very special gift to Jesus and ultimately to the entire world.

Jesus prayed about how the disciples had glorified Jesus by who they were and what they had done. Just as an excellent musical student brings glory to her teacher, so the disciples brought glory to Christ. They lived for Him and weren't corrupted by the world.

Jesus prayed about how God had protected the disciples---not from physical torment or challenge but from the power of Satan that could have destroyed them far more devastatingly than any persecution or illness.

He prayed about the unity of His followers---that they might be one even as Jesus and God were one.

So, in this prayer for the disciples, there is more giving thanks for them than praying for their needs. Jesus could see what they would do in the future and He was satisfied and proud. He could see the potential and knew it would be realized.

Imagine, in your mind, Jesus praying this prayer, and looking upon Peter who would soon deny Him. Jesus was able to see beyond the denial to the man who would be the rock upon which God built the Church.

Once someone came upon Michelangelo chipping away with his chisel at a huge shapeless piece of rock. He asked the sculptor what he was doing.

Michelangelo answered, "I am releasing the angel imprisoned in this marble."

Jesus saw and supported the hidden heroes in all the disciples.

It's upon the rock and the foundation of the first disciples that we continue to build Christ's Church.

We continue to be called by God to be God's people---just as the first disciples were called.

We continue to seek to glorify Jesus by our words and our lives lived out for Him---just as the disciples glorified Jesus by allowing God to work in their lives and bring them to full potential.

We continue to be protected by God---not from hardship and difficulties but from despair and isolation from our Lord and one another.

We continue to be united within this congregation, within our denomination and ultimately with the whole Body of Christ of which we are a part.

God continues to release angels from the rough and rocky natural resources we call our lives.

God continues to link us to one another and to all who have come before us right back to Peter, James, John and all the others.

In a world where countries divide in war or threaten to separate...
In a world where rich and poor are further apart than ever before...

In a world where families break up and friendships fade away with time....

In a world where the face of a community changes with a transient population....

....we, in the Church, have important links with one another---but most significantly we are connected to the generations of believers who have gone before us---right to the very beginning of the Church.

Denominational and theological differences cannot take away from the fact that, in Christ, we are one---past, present and future.

Indeed, the past witness of Christians in the world offers us a challenge to our own witness. We are challenged to pattern our lifestyle after those who have gone on before us.

A third century historian wrote these words about those who followed Christ @250 AD:

"Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language or custom. They do not separate themselves into cities of their own; they use no special language; nor do they follow an eccentric pattern of life. Their doctrine, unlike that of many religious movements, is not based on human ideas or philosophy. Although they live in Greek or barbarian cities, depending on their place of birth, and follow the usual customs of those cities, they never cease to witness to

the reality of another city in which they live. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land.

They marry like everyone else and beget children, but they do not expose their unwanted children to the elements as we do. They share their hospitality with each other but not their marriage beds. They obey the laws of the land but in their own lives go far beyond all the law's requirements. They love all people, and by all people are persecuted. They are put to death and yet they are brought to life. They are poor but they make many rich; they are completely destitute and yet they enjoy complete abundance. They are treated by the Jews as foreigners and are hunted down by the Greeks; and all the time those who hate them find it impossible to justify their hatred.

To put it simply: What the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world."

What the disciples started, those in 250 AD carried on.

What our historian saw way back then has been shown over and over again down through the ages until now---story after story after story----foundation after foundation---after foundation.

Now it's our turn!

The world is a far better place for Christ having been here.

The world is a far better place for the disciples, and all who have followed them, having been here.

We continue the construction.

Now it's our turn.

In the 1930s in Stavropol, Russia, Stalin ordered that all Bibles be confiscated and Christians be sent to prison camps. Ironically, most of the Bibles weren't destroyed.

When the USSR broke up, a group of Christians arrived in Stavropol for ministry. They requested Bibles be shipped from Moscow but there was a long delay. Someone told them about a warehouse outside of town where confiscated Bibles were still stored.

The team was granted permission to distribute the old Bibles. Hiring several local Russian workers, they began to load their trucks.

One young man, a hostile agnostic, came only for the day's wages.

But not long after they had started, he disappeared. He was found in a corner of the warehouse, weeping, a Bible in his hands.

He had, by divine coincidence, picked his own grandmother's Bible off the shelf! Her signature was on the front page.

The power of God began the process transforming that man by the very Bible for which his grandmother had been persecuted.

Links between generations, links between centuries, links between millennia---some simple and direct---some wonderfully miraculous.

All of them part of God's plan.

All of them working in an unfinished Church---a Church that always has unfinished business.

So many angels released in the past to do the work.

So many more to be come!

(1687)