

May 17, 2026
John 17:1-11

Easter 7
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Baccalaureate of Our Lord”

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

In addition to being the month in which we celebrate Mothers’ Day and the Victoria Day long weekend, May is the month in which many colleges and universities hold graduation ceremonies to celebrate the accomplishments of students who receive degrees and move on to new horizons in their lives and careers. This was my experience when I graduated from university on May 13, 1979, gathering with my fellow graduates in the school’s athletic center to celebrate the completion of our four years of rigorous academic studies. Because my university was founded by the German Reformed Church (now a part of the United Church of Christ), Ursinus also had a history of holding a Baccalaureate service the day before graduation. A Baccalaureate is a worship service that is usually held a few days before graduation ceremonies in high schools, colleges, and universities. The goal of this service is to honour graduates and to help them *“find spiritual meaning in their time of transition and as they prepare for their next phase of life.”* (Rebekah Cancelosi). While not as elaborate as the commencement ceremony, I remember the Baccalaureate service as a meaning occasion to reflect on the experience of my four years of university education and the next step I was taking in entering seminary to prepare for ordained ministry in the fall.

As I remembered these experiences on the anniversary of my university graduation (in case I forget the date, my degree is hanging behind me in my office!), I reflected on the meaning of Jesus’ prayer in today’s Gospel lesson, and how in many ways it seems to function like the Baccalaureate prayers at my graduation. While you will not find the word “baccalaureate” in the Bible, Jesus’ prayer in John 17 shares aspects of the prayers offered as graduates bid farewell to their school and move on to the next chapter in their lives. Jesus’ prayer is the final scene of the Farewell Discourse in the Fourth Gospel in which Jesus bids farewell to his disciples before his crucifixion and prepares them for their transition from disciples to apostles, from students of Jesus to those who will be sent out to continue his mission. By concluding his narration of Jesus’ farewell with a prayer, John is adhering to the conventions of the farewell genre found elsewhere in the Bible (*“Then Moses recited the words of this song, to the very end, in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel”*

– Deuteronomy 31:30). The difference with Jesus’ prayer is that it is not a death-bed prayer but the prayer of the One who is on the verge of willingly laying down his life and thus completing God’s work. The prayer stands between Jesus’ words to his disciples in the Farewell Discourse and the beginning of the Passion Narrative that will culminate in his death and resurrection. The prayer is not a universal or timeless prayer but one decisively grounded in and shaped by Jesus’ coming “hour,” the fulfillment of God’s purpose and mission in him; *“Jesus prays in the confidence of the eschatological victory of his hour”* (Gail O’Day). When Jesus prays, he models the confidence with which he taught his disciples to pray (*“And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.”* – 15:16). In this prayer, the reader is given a glimpse of the intimacy that marks the union of God and Jesus and how this union will affect the ties that bind the disciples together as the one Body of Christ; *“through this prayer for glory and unity, Jesus provides a glimpse into the communion of Father and Son into which he invites all humanity to enter.”* (Francis Martin and William Wright).

In the opening section of the prayer, Jesus prays for himself and his work. The phrase *“after Jesus had spoken these words”* (17:1) refers to the Farewell Discourse (14:1-16:33) and marks the transition in which Jesus no longer includes those around him in his range of vision but now directs his words to God when *“he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.’”* (17:1). Jesus speaks explicitly of his “hour,” in which he will be glorified through his act of self-giving love:

- “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” – 12:27-28a.
- “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that the world might live through him.” – 1 John 4:9.

In contrast to the account of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane in the Synoptic Gospels (*“I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake”* – Mark 14:34), Jesus experiences no “agony” in this prayer, because he recognizes that the “hour” is the ultimate purpose of his work and the completion of his revelation of God. Jesus’ glory, like the rest of his ministry, derives from God: *“I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do”* (17:4). In Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, the glory of God will be made visible. God is the source of everything for Jesus and for the faith community, *“to give eternal life to all whom you have given me”* (17:2). Jesus asks the Father to glorify him so

that when he has been crucified, resurrected, and exalted into glory, he may give eternal life to the disciples whom the Father gave him. “Eternal life” means that his followers will know the Father, *“the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”* (17:3). Through his incarnation, Jesus reveals the Father to human beings: *“No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”* (1:18). Jesus’ whole life has centered on doing the Father’s will (*“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.”* – 4:34); he asks the Father to transform his humanity with divine glory through the events of his hour and so reveal the deity of the Incarnate Son so that the Father might *“glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.”* (17:5).

- “If Christ had not been glorified, the Father’s glory could not have come to us but would have perished with Christ. The glory of Christ and that of the Father are interlocked and interwoven. These are one indivisible glory, so that the Son receives his glory from the Father and the Father is glorified in and through the Son.” – Martin Luther.

Jesus continues to describe the work through which he has glorified God on earth in which *“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world”* (17:6). Making the name of God known echoes the word of God proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah: *“Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore, on that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I”* (Isaiah 52:6). The community’s knowledge of the relationship between God and Jesus is knowledge they have received from Jesus’ revelation; God is the source of everything Jesus does. Through their faith in Jesus, the faith community knows that everything about Jesus is from the Father; the fact that *“they have kept your word”* is constitutive of the life and mission of the disciple community:

- “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” – 15:16-17.

Jesus has planted a knowledge of the Father in the hearts of the disciples (*“ ... for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me”* – 17:8). By letting his revelation take root and grow through the Holy Spirit action in them, the disciples come to a living, experiential knowledge of the truth of Jesus’ words.

- “I have read the whole Gospel as an invitation to enter into a relationship of trusting Jesus, with continuing ‘life in his name’ involving an ongoing drama of desiring, learning, praying, and loving in community, for the sake of God’s love for the world.” – David Ford.

Jesus now turns his attention to praying for his disciples whom he will send out into a hostile, unbelieving world: *“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.”* (17:9). In the Fourth Gospel, “world” (*kosmos*) stands for those who are at enmity with God (*“The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.”* – 7:7). Since the world does not know God, Jesus’ prayer to God for the world as “world” is precluded by definition: Jesus’ prayers can only be for the work of the faith community in the world, not the world itself. *“To pray for the world would be almost an absurdity, since the only hope for the world is precisely that it should cease to be the world!”* (C.K. Barrett). As Jesus reveals the Father’s glory by accomplishing his saving work, so that disciples similarly reveal the divine majesty of the glorified Jesus (*“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”* – 15:8). Through their visible unity, faithfulness, and love, they bear witness to the reality of the Father’s love in Jesus, so that *“the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me”* (17:23). The faith community belongs mutually to God and to Jesus, and the impetus for this mutuality of possession rests with God. The beginning of the faith community’s life is located with the gift of God (*“The Father loves the Son and has placed all things into his hands”* – 3:35). For Jesus to be glorified in the community means that the identity of Jesus is made visible in them when they love one another as he has loved them; *“the formation of a community based in the mutuality and intimacy of the relationship of God and Jesus belongs to the completion of God’s work.”* (O’Day).

As a result of his hour that is approaching, Jesus leaves the world and goes to God, while the disciples remain in the world. Jesus’ absence from the world and return to God are the defining realities of the future lives of his disciples; far from abandoning them, in this way he is accomplishing God’s Will for them:

- “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” – 14:3.
- “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” – 16:7.

Jesus addresses God as “Holy Father,” a title rarely used in the Fourth Gospel; its usage here is appropriate because Jesus will pray that God will “make holy” (*hagiazo*) his disciples, setting them apart to continue Jesus’ mission in the world. Jesus prays that God will “*protect them in the name that you have given me*” (17:11); as Jesus’ revelation of God’s name shaped the identity of the faith community during his ministry, he now asks that God keep secure the faith community’s grounding in that name. The disciples will still be in the world and are going to face its hatred in the form of persecution, hostility, and temptations:

- “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you.” – 15:18-19.

Since the disciples will face the world’s attacks, Jesus asks the Father to keep protecting them. God’s protection of the disciples preserves them in communion, “*so that they may be one, as we are one.*” (17:11). The basis for this unity is the unity between the Father and the Son, the good news that “*there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*” (Ephesians 4:4-6). Their invisible communion with God becomes visible in their earthly communion of faith and love, the Church. The world’s attacks are going to threaten the disciples’ unity, which will compromise the power of its witness to the world about the Father’s in Jesus. The purpose of Jesus’ petition is to ensure the unity of the faith community, which mirrors the unity of God and Jesus; “*the community’s life after this hour is thus entrusted by Jesus to God.*” (O’Day).

Jesus’ prayer for his disciples and for the faith community of every generation may be heard as his “baccalaureate” as it is a prayer for them as they are sent out into the world to continue to proclaim “*the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9). Jesus is aware of the challenges and obstacles that will be placed in their path by a world that is by definition hostile to God and the message that the disciples will carry into this world; in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, the Evangelist notes that Jesus was “*in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him*” (1:10). Jesus therefore prays for his followers that they will know that they are not alone as they go forth as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church; they will be in the presence of God and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that will keep them united so that they might find strength in the communion of saints and might witness to the oneness of God and the truth of God’s Word through their unity. As they were called to follow the one

who came “*not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45), so their unity will not be for their sake but for the sake of their witness to the world, so that all might know that “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*” (3:16).

- “The unity of divided humanity is the will of God. For this reason, he sent his Son, so that by dying and rising for us he might bestow on us the Spirit of love. On the eve of his sacrifice on the Cross, Jesus himself prayed to the Father for his disciples and for all those who believe in him, that they might be one, a living communion. This is the basis not only of the duty, but also the responsibility before God and his plan, which falls to those who through baptism become members of the Body of Christ, a Body in which the fullness of reconciliation and communion must be present.” – Pope St. John Paul II.

I cannot say that I remember much of what was said at my Baccalaureate service before my graduation, but I do remember that I left that service feeling that I had received a blessing as I moved into the next phase of my life. Baccalaureate services are an opportunity to show support for graduates who may feel frightened about the future, reminding them of the support surrounding them in the families and communities that will accompany them on this journey. In the prayer that in many ways is the Baccalaureate of Our Lord, Jesus offers us words of assurance and support that even those the task that has been entrusted to us may feel daunting in a world that is still hostile to the message of the Gospel that we need not despair, for we have been baptized into the community of faith which is the Body of Christ, and we are blessed by the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love so that we can go forward in the assurance that “*from sorrow, toil, and pain, and sin we shall be free; and perfect love and friendship reign through all eternity.*” (ELW Hymn 656). May God join our hearts together “*that it may be known that we are your children, that your presence will be among us, and we may keep unity in the bonds of peace*” (World Council of Churches).

Amen.