



Easter 7 (A)

Split Screen

[RCL]: Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

In every musical – and in many movies – there seems to be a moment when two or more main characters, are separated, but both still on stage or screen. In a musical, they may sing a song together. In a movie, the screen is likely split between them, showing what each is doing. It’s typically not a happy moment. It often happens after a separation of some kind between the characters. It often signifies an emotional rift as well as a physical one.

In these scenes, the characters are together but separate, in what John Mayer termed in his 2003 song of the same title, “Split Screen Sadness.”

2020 has given us all our very own “split screen sadness” moments — too many to count. COVID-19 has forced us all to maintain physical distance, canceling our services, keeping us apart, away from our churches and away from the Eucharist. What, then, does Jesus’ prayer for us all to be one mean here, for us, in our times? How can we “be one” when we have to settle for online services, phone calls, and Zoom meetings rather than the hugs, sacraments, and in-person love to which we are so accustomed?

The church throughout history has had its share of split screen sadness. The 1918 flu pandemic most recently forced churches closed in many of the same ways that we have had to close in 2020. The HIV-AIDS pandemic gave people a healthy fear of disease and of one another, too, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Long before that, plagues would occasionally rip through the population, forcing separations and leaving sickness and death in their wake. In turbulent times, it is helpful to remember that we are not the first to walk the road before us. We are not the first church people to experience the “split screen sadness” caused by disease.

In this Gospel passage, Jesus is preparing to die. He has spent a long time talking to the disciples and attempting to prepare them, as he shared dinner with them and laid aside his robe like a servant, the night

before he would lay down his life for his friends. Now, it seems, he is preparing both himself and his disciples for his death, as he prays for them.

Most of us understand what it is like to be with a person as they prepare to die. We know that truths are spoken then. We know how to say goodbye. The farewell discourse is more relatable in its Holy Week context than it perhaps is here, in the Easter lectionary, after the Ascension.

Perhaps one thing this pandemic has done for us is to point out that we don't often know how to be separate but still united. Now, as we read this passage in light of the Ascension, we realize that that is exactly what Jesus is preparing them for — to remain united with him, and with each other, even when he is not physically present.

Later in this chapter of John, Jesus will say, *“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”*

Crisis teaches us truths. This is true of the disciples at the time of Jesus' death, and it is true of us here in 2020. In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself is the Word made flesh, the truth made flesh. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the disciples learn that the worst thing is never the last thing, but that in Christ, all things are made new. In our own time, perhaps, we are learning similar things.

When Christ ascended, the disciples looked around at each other, and the sky, such that the angels standing by asked them, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (Acts 1:11). It is okay not to know what to do next. It is okay to be still. It is okay to put one foot in front of the other and muddle through. And it is okay to be taken aback by physical separation from those we love and whose presence comforts us and lifts us up.

We are learning, or have learned, to be with one another, united in Christ, even when we are not physically present. During our time of “split screen sadness,” we have united around the Word and our mutual love for Christ and for one another. We have done nothing perfectly, but we have allowed the crisis to teach us. We have been sanctified by the truth and held together in love by Christ.

This might also serve to teach us other things, such as how we are united in Christ with people we have never met: Christians around the world continue to gather, and Christ's prayer is that we be one with them. Christ is holding us together with people all around the world. Even though we cannot be physically present with Christians in other nations, we can be united with them in Christ, just as we have been united even in our own separations within our congregations.

We are also united with the saints throughout history: Christian heroes from all walks of life and throughout the ages are united with us, too, though we have never been able to be physically present with them. Let our separation during the pandemic always remind us that physical separation is no obstacle to Christ, who holds us all together in love.

Perhaps, then, this pandemic can teach us more than how to better wash our hands. Perhaps it can do more than be a moment of split screen sadness for all of us. Perhaps it can truly teach us to be one in Christ with people with whom we may never be physically present in this life. Perhaps it can serve as a reminder that regardless, we are all one in Christ, and Christ is with us, now and always. In Christ, neither death, nor life, nor pandemics, nor wars can ever separate us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Anna Tew is a Lutheran pastor serving Our Savior's Lutheran Church in South Hadley, Massachusetts. A product of several places, she was born and raised in rural south Alabama, lived most of her adult life to date in Atlanta, and has called New England home for the past four years. Anna graduated from the Candler School of Theology in 2011, and since then she has served in both parish ministry and hospital chaplaincy. In her spare time, Anna enjoys keeping up with politics and pop culture (especially music), hiking, running, and CrossFit.