

*Taking a Step Closer*  
A Sermon on John 17:1-10 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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Our Gospel lesson comes from the seventeenth chapter of John. In the four chapters that lead up to this passage, Jesus has eaten the last supper with his disciples, washed their feet, and delivered a sermon about their relationships with him and with one another. In chapter sixteen Jesus warned his disciples that it was not going to be easy to act like Jesus' disciples in a world where many people are unfamiliar or hostile to Christian ideas like compassion, honesty, forgiveness, generosity, and being open-minded about the ideas and situations of those who are different from oneself.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus prays for his disciples. *Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him."* Let's spend a few minutes considering the God who is the focus of Jesus' prayer.

Jesus looked up to heaven. We often imagine or think of God as dwelling above us in some way. God is unknowable. God is transcendent. We acknowledge God's transcendence when we approach worship and communion with reverence and solemnity. We acknowledge we don't understand God's work completely when we observe a brief period of silence after the communion bread is broken.

God is transcendent. Thomas Merton expressed this idea in a prayer. *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.*

God's ways and works and knowledge are greater than our ways and our works and our knowledge. God is transcendent. God is also imminent. God is close beside us.

God's presence beside us is a second theme of Jesus' prayer in John 17. Jesus says, *this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* This is eternal life, that we might know God as the one who took on flesh and dwelled among us in the person of Christ Jesus. This is the life whose energy and love will never end; that we might know God to be the one who journeys beside us.

Jesus continues his prayer, saying: *Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 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.* Jesus gives us a picture of us being close to God. We sense we are close to God because we are able to discern some truths about God.

So we hold that both of these ideas are true. God is the most transcendent one, and yet God is also the most imminent one in our lives. God is the one who knows what is in our hearts. God knows us best.

When I was a little boy there was an old woman in our little congregation who clearly understood that both of these things are true. The old woman understood that God is the one who is far beyond our knowing, and yet God is also the one who knows us best. In our little church on the east side of Cleveland during prayer time, the old woman would say a simple prayer that went something like this: "I give thanks to you my God, that you are the God who finds a way out of no way." Her prayer acknowledged that we will never completely understand God's way of doing things, and yet God knows all about our lives. God knows what is most important to us. God is the one who helps us find a way out of no way.

We come to this place to deliberately sit in the presence of the one we will never fully understand and to sit in the presence of the one who knows us best. We affirm that God is on the

journey beside us, during our worship, as we say our prayers and as we receive communion. We affirm that God is on the journey beside us in the sacrament of baptism.

In just a few minutes we will participate in the sacrament of baptism, with this beautiful little child and her family. The baptism liturgy is a deep affirmation of God's presence beside us in daily life. Baptism changes us. In baptism we invite God into our lives. In baptism we vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. In baptism we take a step closer to the one who creates us, a step closer to the one who redeems us, a step closer to the one who sustains us.