

**John 17:1-11**

**May 21, 2023**

*“When Jesus had spoken these words, He lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said, ‘Father... I have manifested Your name to the people whom You gave Me out of the world... I am praying for them... I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, which You have given Me, that they may be one, even as we are one.’”*

Jesus prays these words in the Upper Room on the night He is betrayed. His disciples are there with Him, minus one, the one who betrays Him. Six weeks later, after Jesus ascends into heaven, our Acts Reading tells us that His disciples again gather together in an upper room, and again minus one, the one who had betrayed Him.

Coincidence? No. Judas Iscariot was not with Jesus and the disciples when He prayed: *“Holy Father, keep them in Your name...that they may be one.”* No wonder Judas was not with the disciples six weeks later in the upper room. He went *“to his own place,”* it says. And that place was not with the gathering of Jesus’ disciples.

It’s not that Judas had committed a sin which was unforgivable. That’s not why he perished. It’s this: Judas went to his own place, and that place was not the place where Jesus’ disciples gathered together.

St. Peter’s words in our Epistle for today explain it well: *“Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”* The lion does not seek to devour the entire herd. He seeks the one who is not gathered with the herd.

Judas was not with the herd. He was one of the Twelve. Jesus had chosen him. He was a follower of Jesus. He saw His miracles and heard Him preach. But the night when the lion was on the prowl, Judas was not with the others. Jesus was teaching His disciples. He was praying for His disciples. But Judas was in his own place. And the lion tore him limb from limb and devoured him.

Jesus does not pray that His disciples become strong enough to fend off the roaring lion by themselves. Even Judas, one of the Twelve, had not the strength to defeat the lion. But there is strength in staying with the herd. And for this Jesus prays. *“Keep them in Your name, Father, that they may be one.”*

And the Father says Yes to Jesus’ prayer. Six weeks later the eleven disciples *“with one accord,”* it says in Acts, *“were devoting themselves to prayer, together, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers.”* They are one. They gather as one body. They gather in the name of Jesus. They do not go to their own places. Their place is together. Together as Jesus’ disciples. And these the lion is unable to devour.

If you are strong in faith, if you are strong in Word and in prayer, good for you. The lion will not be able to devour you. But only if you stay with the herd. If you are weak in faith, weak in your prayer life and in the study of the Word of God, you need to become stronger in these. And yet know this: the lion cannot devour you if you stay with the herd.

In a herd of cape buffalo there are both the strong and the weak. There are mighty and mature ones, and there are little ones; healthy ones and injured ones. That’s how it is with Jesus’ disciples. There are strong disciples and weak disciples. There are disciples who are mighty in prayer and in the study of the Word. And there are disciples who are weak in these things. There are disciples whose spiritual habits

are as they should be. And there are disciples who are limping along in life having poor spiritual habits. And there are children, young and immature disciples who need the example and the protection of the mature ones.

Last October when I was in Kenya, I saw both lions and cape buffalo. The buffalo are quite impressive. But no buffalo can defend itself when the lions are on the prowl. Sometimes, if a buffalo does not stray too far from the herd, a lion can send it quickly back to where it belongs. Jesus does this with His disciples who stray. He uses the lion's roar to bring His disciples back to the safety of the congregation. And sometimes it's more than just the roar. There have been buffaloes who narrowly escaped the claws and teeth of the lion. They were injured, bloodied, and worse. And they survived only by reaching the safety of the herd. Is it any wonder that the devil tries so desperately to keep straying disciples from rejoining the congregation?

But Jesus prays. He prays for His disciples to be one. He prays for His strong disciples and for His weak disciples. He prays for His disciples who are mighty in the Word of God and for His disciples who are barely in the Word. He prays for His disciples who are healthy with good spiritual habits, and He prays for His disciples who are injured, bloody, and barely limping through life.

Jesus prays for you and for your loved ones. And more, He dies for you and for your loved ones. He gave Himself up to the roaring lion for you. And the lion devoured Him on the cross. But Jesus rose in triumph and the lion is defeated. He has no claim on you. But Jesus does, for His name is on you. When you were baptized, Jesus placed His name upon you, and He wrote His name with blood, His blood that was shed for you and that covers you.

And He did something else. He placed you in the herd of His congregation. You were not baptized in your own place. You were baptized into Christ Jesus, into His Church, into the gathering of His disciples. And so, your place is with the herd.

Have you strayed from the herd? Have your spiritual habits been weak? Do not be too proud to admit it. Repentance must be our daily habit, and there is no room for pride in repentance.

My friend, you have a forgiving God. And He forgives you. Wherever you have strayed, however weak your habits have been, no matter how many or how great your sins, Jesus forgives you. Yes, you are forgiven. And because you are forgiven, do not think that you are now free to stray from the herd. Yes, Jesus defeated the roaring lion. Yet the lion is still able to devour the one who leaves the safety of the herd.

I watched a video last week that I have to share with you. It was a video of a pride of lions in Africa that was attacking a lone cape buffalo. The lions were on the buffalo. One on his rear, two on either side, more in front. The buffalo was finished. It was about to be devoured. But just then the entire herd came rushing at the lions. The entire herd, not one or two, but all of them came and drove the lions away. And that buffalo which was about to be devoured was rescued and was now safely back with the herd.

Do you know of someone who needs to be rescued? Someone who is out alone in their own place? Here is the herd. Here are Jesus' disciples who gather as one. Show us who it is that needs our help. We are all Jesus' disciples. We are His herd. And in His name, and by His leading, we are ready, are we not, to bring the injured and bloodied, those who are straying, back to the herd, back to Jesus. Amen.