

Glory, and Unity
The Rev. Amy Spagna
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Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11

What does the word *glory* mean to you?

The primary dictionary definition of *glory* is "very great praise, honor, or distinction bestowed by common consent." *Glory* can also be the source of that praise or honor; "a state of splendor;" or even "the splendor and bliss of heaven."¹ *Glory* in all of these senses is very much on Jesus' mind in this, his so-called high priestly prayer over and for the disciples. Delivered in the style of an ancient biographer in search of a capsule summary of who a person was, this prayer is very much concerned for the long-term health and welfare for those seated around the table. Did he actually say this exactly as John records it? Probably not. But, that isn't the point. If we were to read or hear nothing else about Jesus other than these 11 verses, we'd learn that Jesus is deeply concerned about three things: one, God glorifying him; two, that he's about to go back to his heavenly home now that his earthly work is done; three, and most importantly, that he is deeply concerned about the ongoing relationships among his disciples, himself, and the God who sent him.

This focus on glory is somewhat unique to John. Scholars usually divide his Gospel into two halves, the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory. The overarching theme of the Book of Signs, which consists of the first twelve chapters, is "see the signs that Jesus does, believe he is who he says he is." The Book of Glory finishes off his story. It frames the events of Good Friday and Easter as being about the shaming and

¹ "Glory." <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/glory> [accessed May 13, 2026].

dishonoring of one man, and how God uses it to change everything we think we know about God and how God relates to the world.²

Here, glory is not, as the Klingons from *Star Trek* would tell you, the thing you bring to yourself and your family by winning battles, and without which life doesn't mean nearly as much. It is, as Brother Keith Nelson of SSJE notes, the manifest presence of God which is at the very heart of John's gospel. That presence is both the "visibly manifest" and the "interpersonally mediated presence of God."³ The "visibly manifest" part is Jesus. We are witnesses to how God glorified him by receiving him in heaven. We also continue to be in relationship with him and with one another, and so can share in that glory. To John's way of thinking, it's an essential characteristic of the community: " Glory itself is recast in all this; while Roman autocrats, like more recent ones, might imagine golden statues, Jesus' immense love and then that love manifest in the believers show what real glory amounts to."⁴

What real glory amounts to, in God's terms, is not what it amounts to in human terms. It's still not found primarily in monuments, or winning wars, or in becoming the absolute best at what we do. Real glory is shaped like the cross. It shows humanity what love looks like – love that is marked by the primacy of "other" and will go to any length, including death, on behalf of the "other."

Jesus knew that better than anyone. He also knew that showing God's glory to the world in this way would cost him and the people in his inner circle everything, up to

² Andrew McGowan, "Another World: Ascension and Glory." <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/another-world-ascension-and-glory> [accessed May 12, 2026].

³ Br. Keith Nelson, SSJE, "On Glory." <https://www.ssje.org/monasticwisdom/glory/> [accessed May 13, 2026].

⁴ Andrew McGowan, "Another World: Ascension and Glory."

and including their lives. And so he asks God to protect them, "so that they may be one, as we are one" (John 17:11, NRSV). This extra protection wasn't just about their tendency to argue over who was the greatest, or to ask questions for which they didn't really understand the answers. It was about how, for the next couple of centuries, they and their descendants would have to fight not only their own internal squabbles, but literally to keep their community of believers alive in the face of horrific persecution. Doing that required them to stay in relationship with one another, in the same way Jesus is in relationship with God.

Jesus' earlier statement that he is in the Father and the Father is in him isn't just a comment on what would later be understood as their sharing the divine nature. It's about the absolute trust and love that exists between them. This trust and love makes them vulnerable to doing anything on the other's behalf, up to and including dying and raising from the dead. Love, trust, and vulnerability are critical when it comes to our long-term thriving as well. They run directly counter to the anger and fear which remain the greatest threats to the cohesiveness of our communities. Anger and fear are not truthful or courageous, and they only serve to hide those kitchen-table selves that don't want to have their fearfulness exposed for the whole world to see.⁵ The only way to counteract them is to keep going about the business of loving our neighbors. It's there that we'll find Jesus, and that our own words and actions will show his, and God's, love to the world.

⁵ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Live, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Avery Books, 2012), 41.

Jesus' call for unity is meant to address the very real challenges which his absence posed for his followers. Without his being there in the flesh to lead and guide them, their own tendency to argue over who was the greatest, they would find it just that much more difficult to follow the commandment to love one another. That is the gift and challenge of being in community. It's one which has been tested sorely in the past several years. Whether it's the general state of our civic discourse; the ongoing struggle to put the ideal that all are created equal into practice; earthshattering events like the pandemic; or anything else, the things which threaten to divide us are no less insidious or destructive than they've always been. So too is the toolbox for combating them not filled with new things. The instructions are right here in Jesus' final lecture, which begins with the commandment to love one another, and ends with Jesus' fervent wish for unity – a wish that still takes all of us, working together, to fulfill.

Let us pray.

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*