

May 13, Easter 7B (John 17:6-19)

Christian theology is a love story.

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue

This is a luscious scene. For chapter after chapter (John 13–17) Jesus gushes with love, beginning when he confesses his devotion to his friends by washing their feet. “I have loved you,” he says three times (13:34, 15:9, 15:21), repeating himself like a lover who doesn’t want the night to end—another “I love you” so as to postpone the inevitable “good night.” As he pours out his heart on this last evening on earth, his beloved rests his head on Jesus’ chest: “One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining on his bosom” (13:23). The narrator repeats this detail a couple of verses later, to return us to the intimacy (13:25). Perhaps he lies there on Jesus for the rest of the discourse, as dusk turns to night and tragedy looms in the dawn, as Jesus floods their souls with his hope: “You in me, and I in you” (14:20)—his dream for their communion of divine love. “Abide in my love,” says Jesus (John 15:9). Finally, in chapter 17, he concludes with a prayer as he agonizes about the imminent separation from his loved ones: “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am” (17:24).

In the passage for this Sunday, we hear desperation as Jesus looks to the heavens, praying for his friends. Surrounded by his loved ones, Jesus begs God to watch out for his friends while he’s gone. “I am asking on their behalf” Jesus says as he offers his supplication. “Now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world.” He pleads for God to “protect them in your name.” With both crucifixion and ascension on the horizon, the agony of his departure gnaws at his soul; the absence from them torments his thoughts. “While I was with them, I protected them,” he cries to the stars, “I guarded them.” For the third time in our short passage, Jesus pleads for God’s protection—Jesus again repeating himself, using the same word again and again as if fevered with anguished love.

He has lived his life for them—“for their sakes”—and now glimpses a future without them, without his beloved resting on his chest. His spirit is in a panic because he can’t imagine the agony of his severance from them. His mind is frantic because his

body is eternally bound to theirs—"you in me, and I in you." All of this is an unbearable travail.

Jesus yearns. Christ's longing fuels redemption. The communion of divine love will consummate history. Julian of Norwich, the 14th-century theologian, is unparalleled in her vision of Jesus' thirst for reunion with his friends. "We are his joy," she writes in chapter 31 of the long text of *Revelations of Divine Love* (my friend Sarah Jacoby directed me to this passage). "He has longed to have us." Salvation is God's work of "drawing us up to his [Christ's] bliss," Julian explains:

for this is the spiritual thirst of Christ, the love-longing that lasts and ever shall do until we see that revelation on Judgment Day.

For some of us that shall be saved, and shall be Christ's joy and his bliss, are still here on earth, and some are yet to come, and it shall be so until that last day. Therefore it seems to me that this is his thirst: a love-longing to have us all together, wholly in himself for his delight; for we are not now as wholly in him as we shall be then.

Jesus thirsts for companionship with us. We are his delight. Our union with him will be the fulfillment of his desire. "For that same longing and thirst which he had on the cross—a longing and thirst which it seems to me had been in him from eternity—those he still has," Julian comments on the passion of Christ, "and shall have until the time when the last soul which is to be saved has come up into his bliss."

Christian theology is a love story. "For God so loved the world," the Gospel of John declares at the beginning (3:16). That love is Jesus. And Jesus is thirsty. Here in chapter 17 he reveals that his heart pulses with a longing for communion, a desire for reunion—for love in the flesh, the beloved resting on his breast. We hear Christ's heartbeat through the beloved's ears, as he leans into his chest.

For now, we wait. For now, we love from a distance. And we believe that God's love will redeem the world, that Christ will sanctify us with his unrelenting love: "for their sakes I sanctified myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth." His love proclaims the truth of the gospel, the truth about us: that we are the beloved of God, and that in Christ the eternal love of God strains toward reunion with us.