

“Bowling with Bumpers”

John 17: 1-11

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Verse 3: *“And THIS is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent.”* Eternal life IS when Christ’s followers know God.

May is a month of goodbyes. Goodbye to the high school that helped form who we are. Goodbye to a preschool that gave us learning wrapped in love. Goodbye to the Youth Group that supported us through some challenging years. Goodbye to many opportunities for fellowship: our years with a particular friend group, a sports team, acting troupe. It’s all naturally coming to an end.

Here in the church we just said goodbye to smart, inspirational seminary intern Abby Bunn, we’ve celebrated our graduates, and today we’re thanking the elders and deacons finishing their active service.

May is a time for goodbyes.

The very word goodbye is often associated with sadness. If we are in a meaningful relationship with someone or something and it ends, we’re going to miss it. What was once a big part of our lives is now empty space.

And don’t even get me started on saying goodbye to your kid as they leave for their next adventure: travel, work, college, trade school. Yes, the Lord does do parents the favor of making their teenagers somewhat irritable. When you reach over to hug your sweet baby girl whom you love and for whom you sacrificed for these last eighteen years and she squirms away with an exasperated, humiliated “Ugh!” it does make it a tad easier to bid her adieu. But still, no matter how embarrassed your graduate is by your chewing, your breathing, or just the sight of your disgusting toes (!), a parent is most likely really sad to say goodbye.

When we arrived with our first born, our son, at college, we helped him carry his whole life, which he had jammed into six large garbage bags the previous night, up the smelly dorm stairway and into his room. We said hi to his roommate. We smiled thinking about all the fun our kid would have at college: he was ready to launch. And when I started to look for his bedding to help him get set up, he quickly said to us both: “Thanks. Bye.” “Don’t you want us to help you get unpacked?” we asked as he gently herded us backward into the hallway. “Can’t we impart a few final words of wisdom,” I asked? “Nope, I’m good,” he said, and then with a quick wave, he closed his dorm room door. My husband Billy and I were on the grounds of Wofford campus for a grand total of 20 minutes.

And we drove back to Atlanta in silence, shocked that we were returning to a household where the child who had shaped the tone of our days, who had determined the family’s mood for eighteen years, had left us with an empty room and memories.

My best guess is the author of John’s gospel was very familiar with that feeling of sweet sorrowful sudden goodbyes. He was writing shortly after saying goodbye upon the death of Jesus, celebrating His resurrection, and again parting from an individual who had done much more than shape his days. Jesus had redefined His followers’ lives.

Today’s eleven verses from John 17 are Jesus praying directly to God, not silently, but in the presence of his disciples who could hear every word. Jesus must have chosen his words carefully. He knew death was imminent, His departure just around the corner. If you knew you were soon leaving those whom you loved, those whom you’d been teaching for years, you too would surely fine tune your message. And pray they would listen.

These eleven verses are part of a much longer departure speech Jesus is making. Today’s scripture is just a bit of what scholars have labelled “The Farewell Discourse,” Christ talking from chapter 13 through 17 of John. Jesus has a lot to say, but today’s verses, this bit at the end where he prays for his disciples, is special. These are the words we all wish we had to share with

anyone we've hoped to teach. With any person upon whom we want to impart wisdom.

“And this is eternal life,” Jesus prays, “that [people] may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

THIS IS ETERNAL LIFE. Knowing God, knowing Christ, this is eternal life. Not what follows the final reckoning. Not what happens after judgment day. *THIS.* Right now. If you know Christ, and He invites all to know him, there is a peace in your heart that this world cannot touch. A sense of relief that cannot be stolen. A joy that cannot be faked. This, to know Christ, is eternal life.

Your Saint Luke's staff went bowling a few months ago. And it turns out, bowling is like golf: you can tell a lot about a person by the way they bowl. One Saint Luke's staff member bowls with an expectation of excellence. They go all in and care a lot about doing their best. Another staff member, who works gently and patiently with bouncy little four year old singers and bell ringers, picks up the bowling ball, and gives it a somewhat apologetic push down the lane. And then this tender-hearted bowler clearly has compassion for the ten bowling pins who are shivering in fear as the ball approaches them at the end of the lane, praying they'll not be harmed in any way. A third staff member bowls in a perfunctory fashion. They can't pay too much attention to their own bowling because they are focused on affirming everyone else. This person watched me knock down 4 pins on my first ball, follow up with a gutter ball, and then cheered, clapping their hands: “Still really good! Still really good!”

I won't share who won the bowling match, but I will disclose that it was NOT one of your pastors.

I share this silly bowling story because it's a great illustration of how we impart our wisdom when we are saying goodbye, how we prepare to let go of that ball and send it down the lane, to say goodbye to our loved one and send them out into the world.

We hope our shared wisdom is like bowling bumpers, those inflated tubes that rise up as protective rails to prevent the ball from falling right into the

gutter. The bumpers, our wisdom, allows the ball to follow that narrow path. And no matter how that ball gets down the lane, released with a firm hand and inspirational determination, or with an abundance of gentleness and patience, or with our encouragement and affirmation, once we release it we have no control. Releasing is all we can do with those whom we love.

As Christ's disciples in 2026, after reading John 17:3, we know that whacking the most pins and scoring the highest is not the goal of life. The whole art of bowling is what matters. The anticipation of releasing the ball is a little slice of heaven. Reveling in the joy of sport is great. Bowling—well, life, is about the camaraderie, the funny nicknames we give each other on the score card, the encouragement, the snacks. There is so much goodness to be found in snacks.

We let our loved ones go, saying a sweet, sorrowful goodbye, trusting we've equipped them with what they need to know. And then—just as quickly as they gently usher you into the hallway and close the door--they're on their own.

So here is Jesus, saying goodbye to His disciples. He isn't speaking directly to them, but praying in a stage whisper, sotto voce, knowing the heart of his message would be highlighted by praying directly to God.

He wasn't telling them any magic words they needed to say or special actions they should put into place. He simply said, "THIS is eternal life." Knowing God and knowing Christ. This is heaven.

THIS.

Professor of Biblical preaching, Dr. Karoline Lewis writes, "Eternal life is to know God and Jesus. What if it is that simple?"ⁱ What if knowing God, being in relationship with God, is ours to embrace?

John's gospel author was writing during the impossibility of living under Roman rule. We, today's disciples, are also in a world that can feel impossible. Oppression. Violence. Victimization. Depression. Exhaustion. And yet no matter what is happening in the world around us, if Christ's peace is in

your heart, you know eternal life. If we have known suffering most of our lives and find rest in Christ, find LIFE in the living Christ, we know eternal life. The ever shifting ground under our feet feels firm. The hot sun shining on our faces sends beams meant to warm us, to illuminate Christ's ongoing invitation to know Him.

And so this is the crux of the matter, the central message, the reason God sent God's only Son to walk among us: for us to know that the peace of Christ is here for us. Now. That there is no special sacrifice to make, no forbidden food to avoid, no magical word to say. Other than the word Yes. Yes, I trust you, Lord. I want to lay my burden down. I want to be at peace. I want to operate from a place of being beloved. I want that peace that passes all understanding.

And so, dear ones, I pray you have shared this good news with others. Wisdom isn't made to keep private. If you need words to help you share, talk to your pastors or someone you trust. And then be an evangelist. Share with someone you love about the peace in your heart. And if you don't think you can say it directly to them, take a page from Jesus' playbook. Pray it. Not silently, but just loud enough so it can be heard before the sweet sorrow of parting.

Amen.

ⁱ Dr. Karoline Lewis, Working Preacher, accessed May 13, 2026, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-171-11-5>