

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
May 16, 2010

John 17:20-26

“Wake Up”

Throughout the Gospels there are many times that Jesus prays. The most well-known is what has become the Lord’s prayer—a prayer that Jesus taught to his followers to help them know how to pray. There is also the prayer in the garden of Gethsemane—the prayer where Jesus asks God to take away this “cup”, the suffering that is to come. Today we hear another prayer—a portion of a prayer that the Gospel according to John tells us Jesus prays for his followers.

Let’s set the stage before we hear the gospel lesson. The scene is a room where they came to share in the Passover meal, where Jesus has washed their feet, and where Jesus has given them a new commandment to love one another as he loves them. He has told them he will suffer and likens it to the time when a woman gives birth. She has a hard time, but when the baby is born, there is great joy. It is also here that Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, the Advocate will be given to them and they need not be afraid. He reminds them they trust God and they can trust him. Jesus is not only preparing the disciples but also preparing himself for what lies ahead as the evening turns to the dark night and betrayal.

We hear in this lesson a portion of Jesus’ priestly prayer—his pastoral prayer.

John 17:20-26

“I ask not only on behalf of these followers, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

This prayer has no “Lord help me”, no “thank you for my blessings.”

Jesus speaks deeply, intimately with his Father and our God.

And he does so within the hearing of the disciples.

Jesus wants them to hear this prayer.

Jesus knows they will need to remember this prayer in the days ahead.

Jesus knows he will need this prayer to help him stay the course.

He prays as if he is sitting across the dinner table from God, pouring out his heart.

I feel like I am listening to a private, intimate conversation between two friends or even lovers.

Jesus prays knowing he has done all he can. He asks God to fulfill God’s will through this band of disciples Jesus has come to love. He asks God to entrust the future of God’s work to these followers.

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Prayer...hardly a week goes by without someone talking to me about prayer.

Prayer is one of those things that we do but not always with a clear sense of why.

People say many things about prayer to me:

“I don’t know how to pray, especially in front of other people.”

“I’m not sure prayer does anything.”

“I worry if I pray for someone and they do not get better, it means I didn’t pray the right way.”

“When I pray to be healed, why won’t God heal me?”

“If God knows everything, why do I need to pray?”

“I fall asleep when I pray or my mind wanders when I pray.”

What can we learn from this deeply intimate prayer of Jesus as he is about to face the darkest moment of his life?

Praying this prayer did not change what was to come. In another of the gospels, Jesus, praying in the Garden, asks God to change what was to come. The story says it did not. Prayer changes the one who prays, not necessarily the outcome or circumstances. I don’t believe Jesus could have endured the cross without prayer. It is prayer that strengthened his resolve.

Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, said “Prayer can be summarized in two words—wake up!”

Barbara Brown Taylor asks, “How then should I pray? When I fretted over people I knew who were in trouble, so that my worry for them followed me around all day like a hungry dog, was that prayer? When I cooked dinner for people who had plenty to eat at home, thinking about them while I mashed sweet potatoes, was that prayer? When I went outside after everyone had gone to bed and moaned at the moon because I could not come up with the right words to say what was in my heart, was that prayer?”

Brother David also said, “Prayer is not the same thing as prayers. Prayers are important—praying the psalms can start our day well; prayers with a whole congregation strengthen the community. But prayer is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing. Even biting into a tomato can be a kind of prayer.”

Jesus’ prayer in the Gospel of John is the culmination of his having nurtured his relationship to God during his human life. I don’t believe Jesus could have prayed this prayer for his followers without that relationship. Jesus was fully awake to the presence of God no matter where he was or what he was doing.

But I believe there is something more profound here and yet so simple it takes my breath away when I think of it. **Jesus loved God.** It wasn’t that he prayed the right words or at the right time. It wasn’t that he had everything figured out. It wasn’t any of the things we worry about with prayer. It was deep, unshakable love.

In her book, “Enter the Quiet Heart”, Sri Daya Mata says many things about how important this relationship to God is for us. Let me share one thought.

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“The whole world may disappoint us or forsake us, but if we have established a sweet and tender inner relationship with God, we shall never feel alone or forsaken. There is always that Someone by our side—a true Friend, a true Love, a true Mother or Father. In whatever aspect you conceive of the Divine, God is that to you. Throughout the day we have countless opportunities to take our minds within even if it is only for an instant, and talk to God.”

Francesca Battistelli wrote a song called “Forever Love.” It has become my worship song, my prayer, throughout the week. When the cares and worries overcome me and my doubts about being good enough threaten to drown me, and words to pray fail me, I go to God with this love song.

*You are my forever love, you are my forever love,
you are my forever love, you are my forever love.
From the bottom of my heart I'll sing to you
From the depths of who I am I love you
With everything inside I'll run to You
'Cause all that I've become I owe to You*

Jesus loved—loved God with all his heart, loved his followers in an ancient time and place, and loves us yet today. And this prayer from the Gospel is not only for those who followed him to the cross, but for all of those who would follow in the years to come. "And I ask not only on behalf of these," Jesus prays, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one."

“And I ask not only on behalf of St. John Church, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through this congregation’s word, that they may all be one.”

Slide Quote

You don't have to go around looking for God. You don't have to say, "Where is God?" Everyone around you--that is God. ~ Archbishop Desmond Tutu