



WE DO HAVE A PRAYER!

Mothers' Day – John 17:20-26



MAY 8, 2016
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“We DO Have a Prayer!”

I can't help but think that the timing of the last few Sundays' messages has been a bit confusing. Easter was at the end of March, but the last few weeks we've gone back before Easter to the last meal that Jesus and disciples shared. He washes their feet, setting an example; he shares bread and wine with them; he gives them a new commandment to love each other. Then He patiently answers question after question about the fact that he's going to leave them. He's doing all he can to prepare the disciples for his his death.

In some ways, it's just about an impossible task. They don't get it. They can't comprehend what's really happening – can they even hear Jesus through their shock and confusion – through their fear? Then, when he has said all that they can bear, he promises them the Holy Spirit will come – the advocate and comforter will teach them and remind them of everything Jesus has said.

Then Jesus does one more thing. He prays. All of Chapter 17 is Jesus' prayer. He looks up to heaven and first he prays for himself. Not the agonizing, sweating blood, 'let-this-cup-pass-from-my-lips' prayer. They haven't been to the Garden yet. Jesus is not in agony and he certainly doesn't appear confused, although sometimes he seems to praying for himself and sometimes for somebody else. “...Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,” and then he says glorify me. He jumps around from 1st person, I, to 2nd person, he, even referring to himself in the third person, “Jesus Christ who you have sent...”

Then Jesus moves on to pray for those who are sitting at the table with him. Like a mother, praying for her twelve adopted, misfit children, Jesus prays for the disciples. They belonged to God, but God gave them to Jesus to care for, to teach, to nurture. He'll be going away soon, and he prays for these misfit children with the love of a motherly heart.

I remember talking to a woman – a mother – whose son was in my youth group in Florida. “Every time he goes out of the house, I say a prayer that he'll be safe,” she told me. “You know people get suspicious when they see more than two black boys walking down the street. They attract attention from the police. It happens all the time,” she said. “Even if they're not doing anything! So I just keep praying 'til he walks back in that door.”

The whole prayer is pretty complex -- we could easily forget that it's a prayer when we read it. It could be another commandment: Be one. Or another teaching about a relationship with God; or more promises – that one day the disciples will get to go where Jesus is going and share in his glory. But it isn't any of those things. It's a prayer. It's the prayer of one person praying for his friends – friends that he loves very much.

That's important. Have you ever had someone pray for you? Not just a generic prayer, but specifically, by name, just for you – in front of you? When I asked around these words came up: comforted, vulnerable, grateful, honored, awkward, humbled.

I was with a group of pastors at one conference I went to, and at one point they made us split into pairs – see how I put that: they *made* us.... Our assignment was to share some of the ups and downs, highs and lows of what was going on in our lives and then we had to pray for each other. I have to admit that I was much more comfortable when I was the one doing the praying. I mean, I'm no great pray-er by any stretch of the imagination, but at least when I was praying I had something to do. Being prayed for on the other hand, left me feeling sort of hung out there, vulnerable and exposed, with nothing to do but sit there and receive the prayers of another person.

But it was also very powerful. I was reminded that I don't have to do it all by myself; that others are there to support me, and that I am valued – cared for by another.

That's what Jesus is doing here. He's praying for his disciples. He senses their anxiety, their confusion, their fear, and so he prays for them. He knows he will be leaving soon, so he prays for them. He tells them that he is there for them, they are not alone, and they are valued and loved. Whether or not they get it, he prays for them.

It's a powerful moment, but one of the cool things about this passage and this prayer is that Jesus doesn't only pray for the disciples. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word...." That's us! He prays for us, too!

We are the latest in the long line of people – disciples, if you will – who’ve been inspired and encouraged because of the words and lives of those original disciples. We are the ones who have come to believe because of their words.

As you may have noticed, I don’t remember if I’ve mentioned it much, but the Gospel of John is significantly different from the other three gospels -- the ‘synoptic’ gospels -- in theme, content, style, the order of events, even the length of Jesus’ ministry.

"*Synoptic*" is a Greek word meaning, "taking a common view." It’s interesting that only about 8% of John’s Gospel is parallel to the other gospels, and there’s no word-for-word parallelism like what we see in the other gospels. The Gospel of John reflects a Christian tradition that’s different from the other gospels. Many individuals and groups in early Christianity rejected it as heretical.

The Gospel of John is more philosophical, more spiritual, more – woo-woo, as my friends would say about new age spirituality. So it comes as no surprise really when we notice that Jesus’ prayer hangs in the liminal space between earth and heaven; the space between the past and the present and the future (both theirs and ours). And just when we think we’ve figured out just what’s going on in the fourth Gospel, we get another little surprise.

Jesus proclaims God’s love *for* the world, but he prays that these beloved children will be protected *from* the world.

Jesus talks about himself as the Great Shepherd – “My sheep hear my voice” – and just when we’re ready to shut the gate, Jesus says, “I have other sheep that are not of this fold – I must bring them also.” Say what? Where’d that come from?

Just when we get used to Jesus and everyone confirming that God is our Father (making it very difficult for those of us who try so hard not to use gender specific language when we talk about God), just when we point to John to confirm that God is our father, we hear Jesus praying from a mother’s heart. Even in John’s very fatherly Gospel, we get a picture of Jesus who seems very much like a mother.

Maybe we should have known from the beginning – the very first chapter of John, “In the beginning was the word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” This cosmic, eternal, Word -- with-a-capital-W -- is from the greek *logos*, but ‘word’ doesn’t go far enough. In John, the word *logos* signifies the essential Word of God, Jesus Christ; the personal wisdom and power in union with God. The Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, first used the term Logos around 600 B.C. to designate the divine reason or plan that coordinates a changing universe.

Here’s something else: everything that the author of John writes about the Word comes from Old testament descriptions of Wisdom. Check it out: Wisdom comes forth from the mouth of God. Wisdom pitching a tent to dwell upon the earth. Wisdom, beside God as co-creator from the beginning. Wisdom the female figure translated as *Sophia* in Greek.

Raymond Brown in a commentary from 1966 wrote, “There are parallels to Wisdom in almost every detail” found in the opening verses of the Gospel of John. One author even said that the reason John uses *Logos* instead of *Sophia* is because Jesus is male.

God and scripture are full of surprises, and being open to these surprises makes Bible study exciting and fun. Could it be that the Spirit that moved over the waters in creation became a mothering presence in John’s Gospel? The hebrew word for spirit, *ruach*, is feminine, and the greek, *pneuma*, is neuter.

Jesus prayed for his beloved, adopted, children on the last night of his life. He prayed that they would be one, even as Jesus and his motherly Father are one.

Like the Gospel of John -- and the rest of scripture I might add -- a life of faith is a journey filled with surprises. Just when we think we know all there is to know about Jesus, the Good Shepherd, he’s out looking for sheep outside the fold.

Just when we think the ‘Word-capital-W’ is an abstract, philosophical word, we’re reminded that Jesus is Wisdom – Sophia – in the earthly flesh.

Just when we think Mothers' Day is about cards and flowers and – for my mom -- chocolates, we're reminded that the original Mothers' Day proclamation was really an urge to end war:

“... Arise, all women who have hearts, Whether your baptism be that of water or of tears! ... Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country, to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says: Disarm, disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice. Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence vindicate possession.

And just when we argue that God can only be called Father, we hear Jesus praying, “I will not leave you orphaned,” like a mother, worried for her children. You are my own and I will be with you forever.

This is the wondrous mystery that was revealed to Julian of Norwich in the 14th century. This well-educated Christian woman devoted her life to God through study and contemplation of scripture. She wrote a theological treatise – the first book written in the English language by a woman -- called “Showings” or “Revelations of Divine Love.” These reflections after a prolonged illness inspired the words we sang in the opening hymn this morning: “Mothering God, you gave me birth; Mothering Christ you took my form; Mothering Spirit, Nurturing One.”

God is always more than we imagined and full of surprises. God is always closer than we dare to dream. We DO have a prayer.

Amen.