

JESUS PRAYS FOR US

7 Easter -B

May 13, 2018

John 17:6-19

This passage of John's gospel is frequently referred to as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. In the bigger picture, it is part of the Farewell Discourse; that is, Jesus' words in his last hours with his disciples before his arrest.

Those are a lot of scholarly-sounding words to identify, quantify, and qualify the setting and the sayings offered here. Let me share just a little more, from the words of seminary professor, Mark Vitalis Hoffman of United Lutheran Seminary: "The prayer actually runs from verses 1-26. Verses 1-5 preceding our text focus on Jesus' glorification. The text at hand, verses 6-19, focuses on Jesus' concerns for the disciples. Verses 20-26 close with Jesus' request for his disciples' unity and mutual love. Immediately following the prayer, Jesus and the disciples go across the Kidron Valley to the garden where Judas will betray him." [*Commentary on the Gospel* (05-13-18) at workingpreacher.org]

The bottom line is that Jesus is praying for his disciples—not only those who are with him at that moment—but all who will follow him in the generations to come. That means he is praying for us.

I find that humbling and flattering. Last week, I mentioned receiving a prayer shawl after my dad's death. Some years later, some members of my former congregation brought me a prayer shawl when I was in the hospital recuperating from an accident and the surgeries that followed. While I talked about the shawl representing God's embrace, I only barely touched on the fact that those shawls also represented the prayers of the people who stood behind them. The knitters, the people in the congregation who were part of the blessing, and all who, by extension, were represented by those stitches. There is no way to adequately express the feeling you have when people let you know, by their words and by their actions, that they are praying for you. Gratitude and humility are but the tip of the iceberg here, but I could also include feelings of pride, joy, and many more.

That this passage falls on Mother's Day is a coincidental intersection of the U.S. holiday with the liturgical calendar. But as we hear Jesus' plea to God to protect his disciples from the evils of the world, we are not so far removed from the ideal of motherhood: to be entrusted with a child delivered into our arms as a trust from God. Of course, parents never stop being parents, so although many of us are called to be directly responsible for the upbringing and education of children for eighteen years or so, our prayers for those we love never cease; our pleas for their protection and security and happiness continue as long as we are together on this earth. And that's actually bigger than Mother's or Father's Day, because this is what we do on behalf of all those we love.

I think that's especially important for this time and place, when we are bombarded daily by political, racial, and religious divisiveness in a time we had hoped to be "past all of that." What we confess today is that we are not. While you and I are trying our hardest to love others as Christ loved us, there is still too much brokenness in our world—and that means that our work is not complete. Jesus prayed that we may be "one," yet we haven't quite made it there.

The good news is that God's mercy doesn't depend on our getting our act together: grace happens in spite of the things we've left undone. And for that we are thankful, grateful,

humbled, and more. Jesus prayed for us, and even as Christ rose and ascended to the Father, we have the assurance that “the Spirit intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep for words.” [Romans 8:26-27]

Meanwhile, we are on the journey, living into what Jesus believed and continues to believe we can be. As we make our way, God in Christ will continue to inform and equip us. After all, Jesus believed in us enough to send us into the world, as he had been sent.

And that brings us back to the idea of “oneness.” Jesus did not pray for our unity in order that we would all be alike, but rather that we find common ground together, allowing our varied gifts and abilities and personalities to make the whole even greater than the sum of its parts.

Sharolyn Browning speaks of Jesus’ prayer in this way: “The gospel story is a long, beautiful intercessory prayer of Jesus prayed on our behalf....our prayers of intercession are for others. We aren’t really asking God’s help for ourselves; we are asking God’s mercy for something outside of ourselves. Prayer changes how we think and act.” [*Sundays and Seasons 2018*, “Let the Children Come”, 182.]

It is humbling to know that Jesus prays for us; and it is an honor to realize that he has called us together in partnership to do the same for others. Your prayers—together with the prayers of others for you—will change how you think and act. As we move toward being *one*, we can make a world of difference. Amen.