

B Easter 7 5.12.24

John 17:6-19

Focus Statement: Jesus prays for us.

Have you ever had someone say to you, “I’ll pray for you?” Going a step forward, have you ever had someone then follow through and actually pray for you, out loud, in that moment?

Think about how that made you feel. Heard, valued, entrusted into the hands of another?

The feeling not just of knowing someone is praying for you, but actually experiencing that prayer, is powerful.

Let’s get some fun facts out of the way right at the beginning, so we can get into the meat of this morning’s Gospel text, because it is a powerful one. On this our penultimate Easter Sunday—Pentecost is next week and is still an Easter service—we hear a reading from the seventeenth chapter of John, the last part of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse. The Farewell Discourse, as a recap, is Jesus’ last words to his disciples on the night of his betrayal. Jesus speaks right up to the end of chapter seventeen, then chapter eighteen, which we read on Good Friday, opens, “After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples...to a place where there was a garden” where they are met by Judas “together with a detachment of soldiers, together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees” who eventually bind Jesus and take him to the High Priest, beginning Jesus’ Passion. These words are it. They are the very last thing Jesus will ever say to his disciples before his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. A fact Jesus knew well, though the disciples did not understand yet.

The Farewell Discourse is really a lecture in three parts. The first part we read on Maundy Thursday, where Jesus washed the disciples' feet and gave them the commandment to love one another as he had loved them. We've been reading through the second section the last few weeks, this extended lecture, for lack of a better term, where Jesus recapped all his previous teachings for his disciples, reframing all his teachings in light of his upcoming death and resurrection and assuring them of God's continued presence with them through the Holy Spirit after his ascension. Then in chapter seventeen, Jesus stopped talking to his disciples and started talking to God. Started praying to God on behalf of his disciples. That's who Jesus was talking to in this whole reading we just heard. Every time Jesus said "you" or "yours" the "you" was God. At the start of the sermon, when I asked if you've had someone pray out loud for you, in your presence, so you can hear them, that is what Jesus was doing for his disciples in our Gospel reading for this morning.

And what did Jesus pray for? Throughout Jesus' ministry, as he was making God's name known, revealing God's nature, identity, characteristics to all of God's people, he had also been the leader, teacher, and protector of this group of followers. He showed them what it looked like to love God and love each other. He taught them the expansive, unconditional, nature of God's love. His verbal sparring kept them safe from those who sought to silence him. But now, Jesus said, he was returning to the place where he'd come, he was going back to the Father. The disciples wouldn't be alone, he'd already promised them the Holy Spirit, but he wouldn't be with them in the flesh, right alongside them, in the same way anymore. So Jesus prayed to God that God would take over that role of guiding and protecting them. Just as, this is the key detail, just as God had sent Jesus into the world, had protected and

kept Jesus safe until Jesus' work was done, Jesus now asked God to do the same for the disciples. To sanctify—sanctify, friends, is just a fancy church word for set apart or assign to—to sanctify them for the work of being God in flesh in the world, just as Jesus had been God in flesh.

But isn't Jesus God, you might be asking yourself. Isn't that the whole trinitarian theology right there. Why did Jesus need to pray to God to ask these things, didn't God already know? Yes, yes, God did know. But this prayer wasn't about Jesus needing to ask God for something, it was about the disciples getting to overhear Jesus' care for them through this prayer. When someone prays out loud for you, God doesn't hear them better because you're standing there, but you do. You feel cared for, supported, loved by that person and through them by God, through their words. That is the gift Jesus was giving to his disciples. It was this final act of care for them, so they could know, because they'd heard, that Jesus who'd loved them, cared for them, guided and protected them, was now turning them over into the hands of God. And not just that, but that they were specially being set apart for continuing Christ's own work. They weren't just being left to wander aimlessly, they had a goal, a task, a purpose, revealing God's love to God's people. What Jesus says to the disciples through this prayer is that the deep, abiding, intimate relationship between God and Jesus, the Word made flesh, who in the beginning was with God and was God, that same relationship is now being expanded to include them. Jesus' joy that he referenced in verse thirteen was joy over having completed the task God had set before him, in revealing God's love to God's people. Now Jesus was turning that work over to the disciples, so that they too could find the joy of being about the mission of God.

And here's another thing about this prayer. I keep saying "the disciples" and "they." But remember, this is John's Gospel. And John's Gospel doesn't have a set twelve disciples like the synoptics do. In fact, throughout John's Gospel but especially in the Farewell Discourse, who is included in the disciples isn't even bound by space and time. As Jesus prayed for the disciples, we find the walls of the room they were in falling away, as this prayer becomes a prayer for all who hear it, all who read it. Which means, dear people of God, this is a prayer for us. Jesus is praying for us. Those warm, fuzzy feelings you have when someone prays for you, the someone who is praying for you here is Jesus. Praying for your protection, praying for your inclusion, praying for your joy, praying for your work. Praying that you would know God as deeply and richly and fully as Jesus himself knows God. Praying that you would be filled with the Spirit just as Jesus was/is the glory of God revealed. Dear people of God if you are ever feeling lonely, lost, or alone, if you've ever felt cut off or unheard, this is a prayer for you. A prayer that you would know just how much, how deeply, Jesus loves you, so much that Jesus has entrusted you to the one whom holds Jesus, the very creator of the universe.

Dear people of God, Jesus loves you. The purpose of this prayer is as simple as that. Jesus loves you. He loves you in that deep, abiding, unending way that a parent loves a child. He knew he had given the disciples, given us, everything he had. Knew he had prepared them as best as he was able, knew his work was done, knew it was time for him to complete his task and for us to take over this mission on our own. He knew he had given us every skill and ability, knew the Holy Spirit would be with us, knew God would protect us and we

would be ok. He also knew this work would be hard. Knew we would face opposition, fear, grief, pain, loneliness. Jesus knew he couldn't remove every obstacle from our path, as much as he might have wanted to. And so, on the night of his betrayal, the night where the final steps of his mission would begin, when he was just hours from the greatest moment of glory, when he demonstrated God's love by laying down his life for us, for his friends, Jesus' final act was to pray for us. Not because God needed to hear Jesus' prayer in order to take over Jesus' work in our lives. But Jesus prayed for us so that we could overhear what Jesus through God already knew to be true. That we, who had been given to God by Jesus, were, are, where we have always been. In the very heart of the Father. Thanks be to God who loves us so unconditionally. Amen.