

**Sunday, May 21, 2023**

**Psalm 97, John 17:1-11**

**“That All May Be One”**

**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, Preaching**

Our scripture passage today is a prayer. Jesus' prayer to God about his disciples. So let me ask you, what is it that you most need to pray for this day? I like one I found about always being worried. It goes like this:

Dear Lord,

Help me to relax about insignificant details, beginning tomorrow at 7:41 a.m.

Help me to consider people's feelings, even if most of them are hypersensitive.

Help me to take responsibility for the consequences of my actions, even though they're usually not my fault.

Help me to not try to run everything - but, if you need some help, please feel free to ask me.

Help me to be more laid back, and help me to do it exactly right.

Help me to take things more seriously, especially laughter, parties, and dancing.

Give me patience, and I mean right now!

Help me not be a perfectionist. (Did I say that correctly?)

Help me to finish everything I start

Help me to keep my mind on one thing ... oh, look, a bird ... at a time.

Help me to do only what I can, and trust you for the rest. And would you mind putting that in writing?

Keep me open to others' ideas, misguided though they may be.

Help me follow established procedures. Hey, wait ... this is wrong ...

Help me slow down and not rush through what I do.

Thank you, Lord. Amen.

Our scripture passage for today is a final prayer from Jesus to God but actually it is a prayer to help the disciples always remember two things. One, they are one body, united with all; and two, God is always with them, Jesus will always be with them. Two simple things and yet so incredibly important to remember.

A while ago I watched the movie “The Farewell” by Lulu Wang. Have you seen it? “The Farewell” is the story of a family who when finding out their beloved grandmother has a terminal diagnosis and will soon die, the family decides to go to great lengths to hide this from her. The story is both touching and humorous in their efforts to avoid the reality that they will lose their matriarch.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus takes the opposite approach. Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus makes explicit references to his coming death. He talks about it all the time. Here, in his final prayer for his disciples, he offers them a final word of comfort and challenge. And for anyone who feels God is a bit distant right now, for anyone who feels a little disconnected with God right now, this passage, this prayer is for you.

You see, Jesus adopted these disciples as his children and now he prays for them. Like a parent, to protect them, to remind them, to give them hope. Now this is not a typical prayer of

Jesus. Most of the time Jesus goes off somewhere all alone to pray, often he prays while the disciple's sleep. Here, he is sitting around a table, after a meal and an extended conversation, with the disciples hearing every single word that Jesus prays. Think about that for just a minute. What difference would it make in your life if you were to overhear what Jesus is praying for **you**? Us. How might we understand prayer in a new way? In the gospel of John there is no "Jesus, teach us to Pray." There is no Lord's Prayer. This is John's, Lord's Prayer. Many call this the Priestly Prayer. I like that. The Great Priestly Prayer. I like that better. Now, let us talk about prayer for a minute.

The story goes there once was a little old lady, who every morning would step onto her front porch, raise her arms to the sky and pray, "Praise the Lord!" One day an atheist moved into the house next door. He soon became irritated at the little old lady, so every morning, he started stepping onto his front porch after her and shout "There is no Lord!" Time passed with the two of them carrying on this way every day. Then one morning, in the middle of the winter, the little old lady stepped onto her front porch and prayed, "Praise the Lord! Please Lord, I have no food and I am starving, provide for me, oh Lord!" The next morning she stepped onto her porch and there were two huge bags of groceries sitting there. "Praise the Lord!" she cried out. "God has provided groceries for me!" At that point the neighbor jumped out of the hedges and shouted, "Ha, there is no Lord, I bought these groceries!" To which the little old lady threw her arms into the air and prayed, "Praise the Lord! God has provided me with groceries and make the devil pay for them!"

So what is the purpose of prayer? Why do you pray? And does God really answer our prayers? Yes, I believe God does answer our prayers, but, but, just not always when we want them answered or not always in the way we expect them to be answered! It has been said, "Unless it's pounded out of us by the harshness of abuse, or educated out of us by the skepticism of the age, or squeezed out of us by the one-two punch of lifeless churches, we have a natural impulse to pray. Pinch me hard enough, and I'm going to start getting spiritual." (1)

And prayer goes through many stages, as our lives go through many stages. In childhood our prayers express, a simple trust in God. Most of our **first** prayers included a basic repetition of what we were taught in church – the Lord's Prayer or "Now I lay me down to sleep . . ." – or what we learned at home. Most other prayers of our childhood were filled with thanks and blessings for all those in our families, and of course our many requests of God. They were simple, honest, and full of our trust in God. How many of our kids, learned that the more things they prayed for, the later they could stay up at night? God bless mommy and daddy, grandma, the sun, my pet goldfish, my bedspread . . . am I right?!

In youth, our prayers become even more one sided. They expressed our needs, our desires, our demands! Give me this O God, please make me more skinny, popular, faster, smarter - O God, make him call today -God, convince mom and dad to buy me that car! You know the prayers, we all prayed them. But most youth pray because they want to reassure themselves that they are not alone, that there is something beyond just themselves.

The problem is that most of us stay in the stages of childhood or youth in our praying and never move into adult prayer, prayer that becomes not just something we do, but something we engage in, a two-way form of communication with God. Even as adults, we believe most of

our prayers should be a time of expressing our thanks and our needs. We believe prayer should be a time of speaking polite words to God, or asking for God's consoling presence. We feel we must be on our best behavior; no wonder then, that we find it hard to pray when we feel angry, really angry with God.

Several years ago I read a book entitled, "A Faith Worth Believing" by Tom Stella. He states, we have learned that prayer is something we "do"- what if it isn't that all? "If prayer is a dimension of our relationship with God, and if healthy relationships require honesty, then we must be willing to own and express to God who and how we are, whether or not we like what we think and feel. The groan that emanates from a broken heart and the fist that pounds a table in rage can be wordless prayers that unite us to God, who is the one with us in our emotional valleys as well as on our peaks." (P. 133) "God shares in the joys and sorrows, the confusion and clarity, the desperation and inspiration that form the yin and yang of existence, because our being is a participation in God's Being. I have come to realize", he goes on, "that prayer is always answered, in fact, it's answered before it's even thought or spoken! And that the answer is the Presence that accompanies us all the days of our life." (p. 134) And sometimes, that means to shut up and listen to what God is trying to say to us in prayer. How many of us do that?

Back to Jesus' prayer. So, this is considered the last Sunday of Easter, the season of white, the season of Resurrection. Notice the first sentence of his prayer is – give them eternal life. And as one pastor states, "here is an idea about eternal life that just might stand out and mean something beyond the empty tomb and the lilies and "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." Jesus prays to God, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Wow. Eternal life is to know God and Jesus. That's it. Its that simple. And to know God is to be in relationship With God. (2) Which is the primary reason why we pray. To be in relationship with God. And his prayer is that all would be one just as he is one with God.

At the same time there is also an emphasis on the world. Jesus prays for the world and sends the disciples into the world so that the world will no longer be separate from God. Jesus was sent to enlighten the world, to give life to the world, to save the world, and to invite the world, to join in the love he shares with God.

My friends, I am here to tell you the big secret way to grow a church, the secret way to fill these pews, are you ready? You must be old school evangelists and go out there, in the world, and talk about your faith, talk about this church, and invite, invite, invite.

Back to that movie "The Farwell" for a moment. The reason they choose to not tell the grandmother she is dying is because of their culture and beliefs. Their belief is that a person's life is part of a whole and the family is a unit that walks the path of life together. Kind of cool, right? Therefore, it is the duty of the children to carry the emotional burden of their elders. Interesting to think of being united, of being one in that kind of way. We are one, Jesus prays.

The second thing Jesus wants his disciples and us to never forget is that God lives within us. This passage ends on a sobering note: "I am no longer in the world." Living with the loss of a loved one, a leader, is quite a burden to bear. At the end of the film, if you haven't seen it and want to – you may want to cover your ears and count to ten . . . At the end, you learn that the beloved matriarch, despite being diagnosed with terminal cancer and given little time to live, is still alive and well. They still get to enjoy her presence and follow her wisdom. It is a joyful

ending to a wonderful movie. But most times, that's not the ending to the story. Most often, the diagnosis ends in death.

Jesus' disciples don't know how to continue Jesus' mission in the face of his death and departure. John's readers, the early followers, are dealing with the very real challenge of trying to live out a mission of love for the world, while feeling the loss of their leader. But hope, hope comes in at the second half of our final verse: "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world." We become the incarnate love of God. In our connection to God, in our prayers to God, we extend God's mission.

Next weekend is Memorial Day, a day that reminds us that in a moment's notice, those whom we love deeply can and do die, lives can be shattered in an instant - by war, illness, suffering, pain, accident, disease, even violence - at any time. We stand on the shoulders of all those who have gone before us, all who have paid and still pay the ultimate price on our behalf. It is now our responsibility to those who come after us to stand up and have the courage, the faith, the trust, and the determination, to live as God's people and create a world we can be proud of, a world of peace and justice and beauty and equality for all. As the author of our Psalm reminds us, the Lord loves those who hate evil and guards us so that we may be strong and have courage to change the world. For no matter what the future holds, good or bad, there will always, always be God in it.

At the risk of incorporating too many movie metaphors, I am reminded of another movie. I recall a favorite scene in Disney movie, *The Lion King*. Rafiki tells the adult Simba, who is grieving the death of his father, Mufasa, that he knows where his father is. He takes Simba to a pool of water, and tells him to look down. Simba complains, "That's not my father, that's just my reflection." "No, look harder," Rafiki says. As he looks, Simba begins to recognize his father in his own reflection. "You see?" Rafiki hums, "He lives in you." Remember that God lives in us.

As one pastor writes, "When we feel lost, aimless in our mission, forgetting who we are—remember that we are connected to God. Remember that God lives in you. Remember that it is in living out God's love for the world, that we have the oneness with God that echoes throughout Jesus' final prayer". (3)

As this the seventh and last Sunday of Easter before the festival of Pentecost, and the beginning of the long, green season, Jesus' closing words, are more than a fitting finish. "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." What a wonderful way to move into Pentecost. Jesus is no longer in the world. The incarnation is over. Jesus has been resurrected. He ascended to the Father from whence he came. But we are still in the world, Jesus' works are now in our hands, and Jesus is counting on us to be his presence in the wake of his absence.

As one pastor questions, what if we were to imagine that the resurrection of Jesus was just the beginning and not the conclusion of the Gospel? That the promises of the resurrection are, in part, ours to fulfill? How would a life of discipleship, of witness, of love, between Pentecost and Advent, be different were we to trust that Jesus meant what he said in the gospel of John, "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." (4) And so, like this prayer, like all prayers, let us remember that we are one, one in Christ Jesus, who is with us always, God is with us always, no matter what. Amen.

- (1) Dawson, The Rev. Gerritt, "Are Your Prayers Getting Through".
- (2) Lewis, The Rev. Karoline. Commentary on John 17:1-11.
- (3) Jodrey, The Rev. Lindsey S. Commentary on John 17:1-11.
- (4) Lewis, The Rev. Karoline.