**May 13, 2018**

**John 17:6-21; 1 John 5:9-13**

Jesus is praying for us. That statement should stop us in our tracks and humble us to our knees. Jesus is praying for us. Jesus *has been* praying for us.

The Bible doesn’t tell us exactly when Jesus became aware the world’s needs, but certainly he understood his salvific role by the time of his baptism. Jesus left his baptism and called people to go with him and learn from him. Then he went from village to town to be with the people. With his people. Jesus ate with the pharisees and healed the wounded and touched the untouchables. He went to everyone, and avoided no one. He spent his life with the masses, cultivating awareness about God, and creating a drive for more personal relationships with God. Ultimately, Jesus knew that his very human life would lead him to a very human death. He was sad about the end and worried about his people. So he prayed for us.

“Holy Father, protect them… so that they may be one, as we are one… Make my joy complete in them… I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but to protect them from the evil one… They do not belong to the world… Sanctify them in the truth… I am not only asking on behalf of these [disciples], but also on behalf of those who *will* believe in me through *their* word, so that they may all be one.”

These protective words of Christ call to mind the maternal imagery he used when comparing his work to that of a mother hen. He longed to gather up the disciples and followers – all of his “children” – and keep them safe under his wing. But now his arrest was moments away, he was leaving them and could no longer care for them the way he had been. So we see here how his mind shifted gears from the lessons they could learn today to their long-term needs without him. Jesus sought reassurance from God that they would not be forgotten or left on their own, trying to defend themselves from powers much bigger than themselves. Jesus knew that neither could he stay with them, nor could they come with him at this time, but he still wanted to know that all would be well.

This is the ultimate act of love a parent can give a child: to prepare the child to be without the parent some day. To cushion the world a bit and provide a safety net. For a parent cares for a child’s life in order that it might grow and thrive and have a life apart from the parent. A mother has a baby and hopes and prays that it will grow old and live beyond her own years. A teacher works with a student in order that it will learn and apply knowledge that might take it beyond the teacher’s own skill and place.

Jesus’ prayer here is the final prayer of a mother who knows that she is dying, and is leaving behind children who still need her. Jesus’ prayer shows a desire to care for his disciples beyond his limited human reach. He was weaving a net that would carry them into their future.

My Aunt Dee died last fall a few days shy of her 70th birthday. She suffered from a recurrence of cancer. The prognosis was never good, but she took each day as a gift. She did all that she could with each loved one, and then went a little farther. She wrote a list of things for my uncle to do with their grandchildren before the kids graduated High School. She bought Christmas presents for them for the years she would miss. She planned her funeral. She did what she could to care for her family when she knew she couldn’t be there herself. She wanted to love them beyond her years. She wanted to carry them into the future that she would not see.

Others have made similar preparations by leaving notes for future birthdays, video taping themselves reading stories to children they won’t know, and one friend actually made a list of potential future spouses for her husband, then froze it in a block of ice in the back of their freezer for him to thaw after her death. With a bit of humor, a bucket of tears, and an infinite amount of love, people want to ensure that life goes beyond their own.

We are surrounded by a glorious communion of saints who loved us and cared for us in order that we might have life beyond their own. Sunday School teachers and pastors, politicians and public servants, inventors and investors and farmers and fathers and mothers. Women and men and children who paved the way for us to have life and breath and being and privilege. We have come to be and believe because of them.

And while some of these women have died, none of them wanted us to join them in death. Instead, they gave us life in order that we might do something with ourselves and the world. We are left here to do more than just get by or tread water. We have work to do.

Jesus called people to watch and listen in order that they would learn from him, then be able to continue his work after he was gone. So here he was perched on the edge of goodbye, hoping and praying that they were up to the task. He gave them his body in order that they might have life.

Now, after generations of faithful followers, we are the body of Christ. Teresa of Avila said, "Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world, yours are the feet with which he goes about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

It was hard enough for him to be Christ, the Savior and Teacher and Friend. Jesus knew that we struggle. He knew that we would fail; he prayed so fervently because he knew that we live in a world that constantly threatens to undo us. “The evil one” is hovering around us. So he prayed, “Sanctify them. Protect them. Send them.”

Our discipleship requires that we testify to the truth – we do God’s work to pave the way for those who come with us and after us – no matter the cost. That means going out into the world, being aware of our neighbors, engaging in what impacts our communities for good or for ill, speaking up, standing beside, and answering "yes" when God calls us to work.

Theologian James Cone spoke to a group gathered at a Presbyterian Church in North Bethesda, Maryland, last year. Cone was known for his black liberation theology, continually advocating for care and concern of poor and oppressed. When he lectured, it was with power and passion. At this particular lecture last year he said something like that it was a miracle African-Americans didn't hate white people. His audience was sympathetic, but all the white people started squirming as he plainly spoke truth to power. One white woman asked him afterwards, "But what do we do?" Again, honest, heart-felt, but somehow communicating that perhaps the task was too hard, big and intractable. Cone paused and then said, "You know what you need to do. The question is, are you willing to do it?" He went on to ask if she, and others, were willing to pay the price that it will require to bring about justice long denied. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Will we do that, no matter the cost? Are we willing to pursue the good that we know needs to be done? Are we willing to pay the price for following Jesus? Are we willing to help refugees find a home? Are we willing to speak out when our government separates families unjustly? Are we willing to call out others’ bad behavior and change *our own* behavior in order to end racism? Are we willing to inconvenience ourselves in order to be better stewards of the earth? Are we willing to be kind to our enemies? Are we willing to pay the price for following Jesus? Are we willing to do something with the life that has been given us?

Some women do this by caring for the poorest of the poor in the streets of Calcutta, mothering those who are not their own children, but who desperately need a safety net. Some people pay the price of discipleship by sheltering refugees. Some people advocate and march to ensure that their local schools are safe for students and teachers alike. Some people take in a foster child or work on prison reform or fight against gerrymandering voter districts.

Some Presbyterians paid the price this week by taking a few hours on Friday morning to remind our local senator that we are called by God to take care of the earth, which means that we will work for jobs that produce clean energy, and provide clean environments for all citizens to live, and clean waters to drink and fish and play.

Jesus prayed for us because we need help. Which is both good and hard news. Although we “are not meant for this world,” neither are we meant to be apart from it. While we are here, we are left to struggle through the work, so that Jesus’ joy may be made complete, and others may come to know and see him, too.

Take a moment and think about who has mothered you in the faith – whether friend or family or stranger or neighbor. Who has cared for you beyond their own life? And what are you doing in your own life to care for others in order that God’s truth would be better known in the world? What needs can you meet in the world? What person or people can you love? How can you build a road into their future?

Then write down on this card one word that you would like Jesus to pray for. Something with which you struggle, or something you feel called to do. Write down one word. Tuck it in your pocket and carry it with you this week. Be encouraged that when Jesus prayed here, he prayed for you. And have faith that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues to pray for us.

1. Duffield, Jill. *Presbyterian Outlook* “Looking Into the Lectionary: Easter 7;” May 7, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)