

So That the World May Know

John 17:20–26

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

His hands trembled as he broke the bread. The cup quivered as he poured the wine out into it. He could feel his heart thumping as if it was the first time he has done this, but instead it is his last. Jesus, sips in a breath as he sees Judas sneaking out the back door to betray him. He knows death’s calling is close. So just before his arrest, we hear him praying at the table, in the presence of his disciples. It’s a long prayer that sounds more Baptist than it does Presbyterian. He prays for himself and what is being placed before him. He prays for his friends to be protected in his absence. And then at the end of the prayer he does something he doesn’t do anywhere else in all four gospels: he prays for you and me—those who will come to believe.

Sit with the notion for a moment. Jesus prays for us. Jesus prays to God to deliver something for us that he won’t be able to. In the gospel of John, Jesus is with God in the beginning. He is the wisdom which created the galaxies. He is the Word that is with God and is God and becomes flesh to be with us. Now, in an all-too-human moment, Jesus prays for help like we do when we find ourselves in a powerless place. Like when driving to the hospital after the phone rings. A stranger’s voice on the other end tells us there has been an accident. We sit under the cloud of uncertainty, the “what ifs” pinwheeling around in our heads. We ask God to do for us what we cannot. We are living on a prayer. Or maybe it’s like when we see our kiddo driving off to college. We’ve brought them this far, but now their life is outside of our control. So we live on a prayer asking God to guard and protect them since we are not able to. Jesus is living on a prayer, too. He has brought his disciples this far. He’s protected them like a shepherd. He’s taught, healed, been there for them. But soon he will be gone. So we hear him asking God to do for us what he can no longer do. Ponder it: Jesus prays for you and me.

Of course, remember what Jesus asks for? “Make them one” he says, “So that the world may know your love.” Jesus’ prayer is to hold us in a love that is bigger than our differences. A love transcending our fears. Bigger than the gap between our age and income brackets. Beyond liberalism and conservatism. “Make them one,” he prays.” It is a nice thought, but it sounds like

a pipe dream, doesn't it? In a recent book about climate change, the author writes that we are well past the tipping point of reversing the damage done to the planet. He says that the only way we will be able to manage the pending catastrophe is that if all eight billion people in the world and our governmental entities can unite together as one. Personally, I'm not holding my breath. I mean, we can't get our own party lines to agree if climate change is even real! We can't even get our churches on the same page. When it comes to theological tensions, Presbyterians have split more times than any other denomination. Still Jesus prays, "Make them one, so that the world might know God's love."

So wonder: if Jesus' prayer hasn't been answered yet, maybe we wonder how prayer works in the world. If Jesus' request to God is that we become one under the canopy of God's love, and it hasn't happened yet, what does prayer do? Remember when we were younger? We might have thought that God functioned as our intervener. We hoped the bad guys would be brought to justice. The loved one's illness would be cured if only we had enough faith. As a child I would fall asleep praying that God would protect me from nightmares. But it isn't always the case. The nightmares still came. Our people still die. The bad guys work the system and injustice wins the day. When a school or house of worship, or place of employment gets shaken up by another assault rifle, our politicians send, "Thoughts and prayers." What does it do? A couple weeks ago, a pastor friend in Chicago got diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. His church held a healing service. They prayed over him. They laid hands on him, anointed him with oil. Today he's in hospice saying his goodbyes. Some would tell us that either our faith isn't strong enough, or God is simply saying no. But if Jesus' prayer hasn't been answered yet, it makes me wonder: What role does prayer play in our lives and in our world?

As we consider our own experiences, how would we answer the question? Maybe prayer isn't about getting an answer. Perhaps prayer is about placing our desires before God in vulnerable trust, and in the process something opens up, allowing us to be held in love. A few years ago, there was a prayer meeting here in town. It was called by one of the more conservative churches in the area. It was an open meeting so some folks from the more liberal churches in town showed up as well. They sat in prayer and as they spoke their prayers out loud, you could tell who was from which church. Some prayed, "God we pray that our denomination returns to biblical values." Another prayer offered a rebuttal, "God, help us to make love more essential than being judgmental." After this went on for a while a child's voice spoke: "God," she said, "Thank you for bringing us together in love." In the moment everyone was reminded, that there is a love which binds us together despite our differences. Perhaps we are compelled to pray because it holds us in love's presence. And in the process something opens up where we might discover that we don't always get what we want, but more times than not we get what we need.

Two years ago, we wrote down our prayers and if they were answered we move the prayer to the "answered" side. It's time to check in with it. Some have moved, others have remained unanswered. "Make them one," says Jesus, "so that the world may know your love." With a trembling heart, he prays for us because he loves us too much not to. May we bravely and humbly do the same. Amen.