

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
November 14, 2020
John 17:20–26

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Amen.

“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.”

Our passage today is part of a larger passage. All of chapter 17 is a prayer. Specifically, a prayer said by Jesus. The first part of the prayer is an affirmation of Jesus’ relationship with and to God, and how Jesus reveals God to the world. The prayer then moves to Jesus praying specifically for his disciples. For protection and perseverance in their

ministry. The final part of the prayer, then is for those that will believe because of the disciples. Jesus prays for mutual love and unity of spirit.

One of the things that is remarkable about this scene is the closeness of it. It is an intimate setting. This is not Jesus going off deep into the garden or up on a mountaintop to pray alone. This isn't Jesus standing a little ways off from the disciples as the struggle to stay awake.

Instead, he is there in the upper room right next to his disciples. They have shared a meal. Jesus has told them his impending future and death. They have had an extended conversation. He turns to pray directly to God, right as he sits next to the disciples. The disciples can hear everything he is saying. They can hear what it is he wishes for them, how much he cares for them and loves them. This is a Jesus who is in deep relationship with his disciples. And a Jesus who is in deep relationship with God. The prayer shows that Jesus cares for his disciples and has deep concern for them. It a prayer that is full of promises.

Many of us, particularly after the last several years of seemingly unending division, in the waters of mistrust and disunity, vitriol and blame, in the harsh conversations and shouting, let alone the added stress and uncertainty of the last 18 months or so of the pandemic. Many of us are weary, skeptical, doubtful.

Maybe some of this weariness is that we are weary of empty promises or broken promises. We are weary of promises made without the trust that the person making the promise will follow through or can follow through. Maybe we are weary of people who have broken promises in the past. Or promises made that are simply too unbelievable to be true, whether by an individual or an institution.

Promises require a certain vulnerability. And in times where it is difficult to feel even more vulnerable, broken promises sting more.

One writer says, “you know how it feels. The breaking of a promise, a promise not fulfilled, goes beyond disappointment, beyond a sense of sadness, beyond mere frustration. It is, instead, heartbreaking because you needed to believe, you gave in to trust, and you allowed yourself to be vulnerable to another’s actions. The end result is not only trying to figure out how to negotiate your feelings about the other, but also how to figure out what to do with the self-exposure you wish you had not risked. That is, the breaking of a promise is at the same time both cause for a reevaluation of the one who broke the promise and also of yourself, why did I think I could believe in this person, this system, in the first place? What’s wrong with me? Why couldn’t I see the truth?”ⁱ

Several weeks ago, we spoke about different aspects of resurrection. And resurrection is also a promise. Maybe one that seems too unbelievable, and yet, it is a promise. Resurrection is a promise that was not broken, cannot be broken, will not be broken, ever. God stakes the incarnation, God’s love, God’s commitment, God’s very self on this promise. And Jesus shows this promise in a prayer.

If you read the entirety of chapter 17, the entire prayer that Jesus speaks aloud in front of his disciples you see that the prayer is complex and can be a little convoluted in its language. Because of this, we can forget that it is a prayer. It’s dense, it’s complicated. Sometimes it sounds like more teaching, or a commandment, but really, it’s a prayer. It’s the prayer of one person praying for others, others whom he loves.

I do a lot of praying: before meetings, before preparing worship or writing my sermon, prayers in worship and the prayers we receive through the week.

Every now and then, I have the opportunity to be prayed for. And it is a powerful experience, it is a vulnerable experience. Sometimes it is easier to ask for prayers for others than for yourself.

When you are being prayed for it can be vulnerable, there is nothing to do but to receive the prayers of another. But it is a reminder that we don't have to do everything, that others are there to support us.

Receiving prayers from another for you can be a reminder that you are not alone, but are valued and cared for by another. And this is what Jesus does for the disciples, in a powerful way.

Think about it for a moment. This is the evening before his crucifixion. He has told them what is to come. He has anticipated the immediate future that “will include betrayal, trial, condemnation, beating, and execution. Jesus stops everything and prays for those he loves.”ⁱⁱ

Jesus prays for his disciples. He must sense their anxiety, their fear. He knows they must be confused with what they have heard from him. So, he stops everything, and he prays for them. He knows he will soon be leaving them, and he prays for them.

“And as he does, and whether or not they understand everything he says, he tells them that they do not have to do everything or even understand everything. He tells them that he is there to support them, that they are not alone, and that they are valued and loved.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It's a powerful moment. And one of the amazing things about this passage is that Jesus doesn't do this only for them, but also for us. As Jesus prays, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word...” And that includes us! We are the latest in a long line of persons who have been inspired and encouraged to believe because of the words and lives of those original disciples.

This promise does not insulate us from an uncertain future, but it does promise that we will not face that future alone. Come hell or high water, Jesus will be at our side, granting us courage in the face of life's adversities and remaining with us even through death, drawing us into new life.

There isn't a version of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospel of John. There isn't a moment where someone asks, "teach us how to pray," followed by the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer. But we get this, we get this beautiful example of Jesus praying for his disciples and for us. We get the example of a person who loves another so much that they take the time to pray. And to pray for the other's well-being and future.

This prayer isn't a simple routine. It's not just a regular spiritual exercise. It might be those things, but this is something more. This prayer that Jesus utters over his disciples, and for us, it's an act of love.

"Prayer is love. Taking the time to name the hopes, joys, concerns, fears, and thanksgiving of someone you know and bring all of that into the presence of God through prayer is an act of love, plain and simple. It expresses your care, your concern, and your compassion for the one(s) for whom you are praying. And it expresses your trust that they are as important to God as they are to you. Prayer is love."^{iv}

Jesus prays for those who have yet to believe. Jesus prays to God and says, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word."

All of us, I imagine, are among those who believe because of the witness and testimony of someone else. We, most likely, experienced someone who shared their understanding and experience with us, who shared the good news with us. Maybe who prayed for us. The disciples shared the good news, and then those that believed their witness shared it with

others, and on and on until maybe the parent, or grandparent, friend, or pastor shared their testimony and witness with us and helped us to experience the love of God in Jesus and helped us believe.

Jesus didn't just pray for his disciples that night, he prayed for us too.

I invite you to hear these words of Jesus as if Jesus is addressing you directly. That Jesus is praying for you. That the promises Jesus utters are for you. Try to imagine – really, to *know* – that Jesus was praying for us all those years ago and continues to care for us, support us, and love and value us today.

Take a moment, right now, think about those places in your life where you need more unity, more wholeness, where you might need a little more peace in your life.

Imagine Jesus right there with you, praying for you. Praying for the needs that you have, for your fears and concerns, for your hopes and your dreams. Imagine Jesus praying for you.

And while I want you to imagine Jesus praying for you – and trust that his prayer long ago was for us as well – I also want you to live into that his prayer also reminds us that we have a role to play in the resurrection promise.

God loves the world (John 3:16), you see, but how can the world know this promise that will indeed be kept without us living this resurrection promise on a daily basis? Just as we heard from those that came before us, God counts on us to embody God's promise in a world of broken ones. God needs us to give witness to the ultimate promise kept when our experience, and that of those with whom we do ministry, knows only empty promises. God invites us to live in the promise that is truly ours forever.

I encourage you to think about ways you can live into and share this promise with others.

1. Maybe find a prayer partner to commit to pray for each other.
2. Maybe send a card or note once a week letting people know you are praying for them.
3. Maybe, if you aren't already, spend time in prayer for the people of Oak Grove in the prayer list that is sent out each week by email.

These prayers and the promises they point to are what make our ministry possible. For us to continue to be as faithful as possible. Possible to be honest with ourselves, one another, and with God when we fall short. Possible to trust that even when we fall short, nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. Jesus prayed for us and continues to hold us in prayer by the power of the Spirit and the community of faith. These things make it possible for us to care for and love each other in word and deed.

Again, the resurrection promise does not insulate us from an uncertain future, but it does promise that we will not face that future alone. It does not remove us from the world and all its challenges, from uncertainty, brokenness, loss, or disappointments. But it does mean God cares for us. Loved us. That come hell or high water, Jesus will be at our side, granting us courage in the face of life's adversities and remaining with us even through death, drawing us into new life. And not just Jesus, but the community of faith that was created by him.

That's pretty remarkable. Pretty amazing. It's lovely. It's love.

I want to end with a prayer, a prayer for us all. The prayer is not original to me, although I don't know the exact origin. It is a prayer from a book of evening prayers in the Lutheran Church. I invite you into a time of prayer.

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/resurrection-is-promise>

ⁱⁱ David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/05/easter-7-b-pray-is-love/>

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/the-power-of-being-prayed-for>

^{iv} David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/05/easter-7-b-pray-is-love/>