

May 13, 2018 • Seventh Sunday of Easter • Mother's Day

"On the power of prayer and a holy-making love"

Sermon by the Rev. Robert English



John 17:6-19

"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

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. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth."

Over the last few weeks in worship, during this season of Easter, we have been hearing passages from John's gospel which focused on the theme of abiding in love and living in the resurrection. A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus describe himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The next week he described himself as the vine and each of us as the branches - this image that reminds us we are to be rooted in our life with Jesus first and always. The next week we heard Jesus give us the great commandment to love one another as he loves us and to abide and dwell in God's love in all that we say and all that we do.

And now, on this the last Sunday of Easter-tide, we hear these words near the end of John's Gospel. These are in fact some of the last words that Jesus speaks to his disciples before the coming of his crucifixion and resurrection. What is most interesting about this passage, and you wouldn't know it from the portion that we read, is that these verses are part of a prayer that Jesus offers to God who he calls Father.

Just picture this scene for a moment, Jesus and his closest friends, they shared a meal, following which Jesus took out a basin of water and washed their feet, inviting them to do the same thing for others. He then begins talking with them about his ministry and his life; teaching the disciples and sharing with them about the intimate nature of God's love, this love that we dwell in, this love that permeates our existence whether we are aware of it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we choose to live by it or not. This expansive and inclusive love of God which persists and insists on our behalf. Jesus then gives this mandate to the disciples to live in love for one another at all times.

Now for me, it is absolutely essential that Jesus commands us to love one another. It must be a mandate, not simply a nice recommendation, or a pleasant suggestion on how to live our lives. Nope, it just won't work, at least in my experience and life, unless it comes as a mandate from some I am willing to call my Lord.

Why? Well loving others is tough work. It's demanding. As human beings we can be terribly insufferable, annoying, frustrating, and ignorant. We cut in line, we don't play by the rules, we hoard our wealth, we trust too much in our own power, we believe too much in our own ability to save ourselves, and we make a mess of our lives and our relationships. Not all the time mind you, but enough...enough to make it hard to live in love for others all the time.

So our reading this morning picks up right as the reality of Jesus' commandment, to love one another as he has loves us, is setting in on the disciples. I imagine them looking at Jesus with a mixture of awe, wonder, love and a little bit of anxiety. Like how are we going to live this life, how can we actually live in your way and follow in your love?

Jesus says to his friends, to us all, don't worry, you won't be alone, for God will send you the Holy Spirit, the counselor, the advocate in my name, who will remind you of all that I said to you and empower you to live this crazy, counter-cultural life of abundant love always.

And then, at this moment, Jesus starts to pray for his disciples. For all of his disciples. He prays for the twelve that shared that meal with him on his final night before meeting with death. He prayed for the mothers and fathers of the early Christian church who shared the story of God's life-saving love in the shadow of the Roman Empire, with the threat of persecution and death looming in the background.

He prayed for all the theologians and all the saints and all who were guided by the Holy Spirit to live the great commandment, to love God and love their neighbor, in their time and for their place, as our view of the world and of humanity became more diverse and more complex.

He prayed for all of us living in this post-modern, post-Christian, post-denominational, post everything kind of age, where Christianity no longer has the seat of power in society, where the church moves to the margins and the fringes, which by the way is where the church is at its very best. He prayed for us living in this time where it feels like following Jesus isn't quite as popular as it once was and we mourn and grieve as the church changes and is transformed.

Jesus prays. He prays for Mary Magdalene and Peter, he prays for James and Paul, he prays for St. Augustine and St. Aquinas, he prays for Martin Luther and John Wesley, he prays for Billy Graham and Pope Francis and he prays for you and for me and for us all.

Every single one of us who are here today and all of his disciples scattered across the face of this earth. It is a powerful thing to imagine, to hold in our mind, that Jesus prays for you and me.

Perhaps this has never struck you before this moment, or maybe before today you have never experienced this feeling, but it is a powerful thing to have someone pray for you. There is this mysterious, intangible and inexplicable thing that happens when someone is praying for you. It is a gift of grace, a manifestation of God's unearned love made real by the power of the Holy Spirit. It surrounds us, it fills us, it makes us whole, it offers us healing, it empowers and uplifts, it catches us by surprise and it reminds us of this truth that we often ignore, that we do truly dwell in the loving presence of God, all the time; that God is at work in this world redeeming, remaking and renewing all things.

A few years ago, if you were here you probably remember, I had an emergency eye surgery for a detached retina. It was the Saturday before Memorial Day in 2010. I was supposed to preach the next day, so I was right here in this pulpit practicing my sermon, which I still think to this day is probably the best sermon I've ever written. Too bad no one ever got to hear it. Because while I was practicing my sermon, I noticed this grey curtain in the right corner of my field of vision in my left eye, which began slowly creeping closer and closer to the center. It was terrifying. After a visit to the urgent care and a transfer to the hospital I was in surgery that night at 12am to repair the detachment before I lost my vision in my left eye forever. I emerged from surgery, was discharged and returned home, exhausted, worn, relieved but still anxious and in need of healing. When I got home after a day of two, I was lying on the couch in the back room resting when my wife Allison brought this [holds up a prayer square] to me.

I have to admit in the midst of it all I hadn't thought about our prayer square ministry and honestly I hadn't thought about all the prayers that this community was offering on my behalf. I was struck by the grace of God when I received this prayer square as a gift. This is a tangible sign of the love of God embodied by this community of faith in prayer. It was a holy moment of connection, sacred unity and pure compassion. It lifted my spirit immediately, it filled me with hope and love and as Jesus says in his prayer for us, it made my joy complete. I slept with this prayer square over my eye for weeks as it healed. A reminder, a way for me to dwell in the love of God that you all made real for me through this gift of prayer.

Prayer is a powerful gift. What do you need prayer for in your life today? Are you struggling with something? Are you in need of healing, are you in need of hope, are you holding on a little too tightly to something you need to set free?

Maybe you are struggling in a relationship, needing or offering forgiveness, and maybe reconciliation seems like it's fading away. Maybe you are worried about your business or your finances, maybe it's hard right now to make ends meet. Maybe you are a parent or grandparent struggling to guide a child in this totally crazy and upside down world that we live in and the stress of wanting to do or say or impart the right thing is heavy on your heart.

Maybe you feel the weight of the world, right here on your shoulders, because of the constant, incessant, overwhelmingly terrible news that streams into our pockets via our iPhone 24/7, maybe you're weighed down by the hate and bigotry that exists in our nation, or the plight of the poor, or the perpetual persistence of violence and oppression that exists in this world.

Whatever it may be, take a moment and take out that Let's Connect prayer card out of the pew rack in front of you and write it down. Share it with the prayer chain or, if you wish, confidentially with the pastors. Just this sacred, ritual action of writing your prayer by hand down on a piece of paper and sharing it with another person in this beloved community lifts us of the burden of having to carry it all alone. It creates a moment for us to remember that our God does offer us salvation, life and hope. Let us pray for you and with you just as Jesus prays for and with us all.

Because Jesus doesn't pray in this passage that life would be easy. He doesn't pray that we all just skip through our days with this naive happy-go-lucky attitude. No, he knows that this prayer would be futile. As commentator David Lose writes:

"And what does he pray for? Not that it will be easy. He knows it won't. This world is captive to a spirit alien to God's spirit. It is animated by a sense of scarcity instead of abundance, fear instead of courage, and selfishness instead of sacrificial love. Jesus -- the one who came to bring abundant life, does not run away in the face of danger, and lays down his life for the sheep -- offers an alternative spirit and reality. So Jesus doesn't pray that it will be easy, but rather that God will support the disciples amid their challenges and that they will be one in fellowship with each other and with Jesus and the Father through the Spirit."

Jesus prays for strength, for encouragement, for connection, for support in love. He prays that all who follow in his way will embody this for one another in our times of need, that we will channel the loving presence of God through our abiding in love with each other. Because sometimes the easiest way for us to feel the love of God, to see the face of God, is to feel God and see God in the face of each other. It is in these moments of connection that our lives are complete and whole, and holy.

It's fitting that we are talking about prayer on this Sunday where we celebrate Mother's Day. How many of us have had a mother who has prayed for us. Now some of you I know well and I know that your mother prayed for you a lot! Now in this community we recognize that Mother's Day brings with it a variety of different emotions and experiences because our relationships with our mothers are like all relationships, they are complicated and layered. We acknowledge that there are those among us who are grieving the death of their mother, those who are estranged from their mother and while acknowledging this, we lift with joy all in our lives who have loved and cared for us as a mother. We also hold and honor the original intent of Mother's Day which began as a part of the peace movement, started by peace activist Anna Jarvis. We honor that peace in any form begins in our homes. Or as Mother Teresa once said: "What can you do to promote world peace? Go home and love your family."

So on this day where Jesus prays for us, let us join him and commit to praying for ourselves, for one another and for peace within our hearts and around this beautiful and crazy world. May God make it so by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.