

EASTER 7 – May 8, 2016  
John 17:20-26  
The Rev. Carenda Baker

As I read the gospel passage for today earlier this week, I was reminded of a favorite anthem we would sing in the small choir of the first United Methodist church that I pastored in Reedsville, PA. It began like this:

“Somebody’s prayin’ – I can feel it;  
Somebody’s prayin’ for me,  
Mighty hands are guiding me to protect me from what I can’t see,  
Lord, I believe; Lord, I believe  
that somebody’s prayin’ for me.” *[John G. Elliott]*

I don’t know if it has been your experience, but I hope everyone here has at least once in your life had someone pray for you directly, in person, so that you could hear it. What is it like to have someone pray aloud for you? How do you feel? One priest asked a small group in her church that question. Here were some of their responses. Comforted. Vulnerable. Grateful. Honored. Humbled. Awkward but appreciative. Like someone really cares.

In the entire chapter of John 17, we hear Jesus praying. Jesus has washed the disciples’ feet, reminded them they are called to be servants of others in love, and shared with them a final meal (though the disciples didn’t know it would be the final meal). His time for preaching and teaching is over now. Jesus is preparing to leave them, and all the while he is still giving himself. He gives his love by praying.

He prays for himself, that his Abba in heaven will be glorified as Jesus finishes the mission he was sent to carry out. Then he prays for the disciples who have been with him for 3 years. First, he asks Abba to protect the disciples, protect them from the Evil One. Jesus doesn’t ask for them to be taken out of the world, but to be protected as they live in the world, because the whole mission is in and for the world. God said a forever “Yes” to the world in Jesus’ coming.

Jesus then asks that his “joy will be made complete in them.” Jesus is talking about the joy which comes from the intimate loving relationship he has with his Abba (Father). You know, the kind of secure and loving relationship that allows you to become ever more open and vulnerable, where you move into higher and deeper levels of truth-telling. Truth-telling about your struggles, your hopes and dreams, your fears and disappointments, your gladness and commitments, your yearning for a sense of purpose, your need to know you will never be abandoned. The joy that comes from a love so strong that it is content simply to sit in the presence of the Beloved. For the disciples to know and experience THAT KIND OF RELATIONSHIP with Jesus and his Abba Father is what will make Jesus’ joy complete. Union and communion. Breathing

with one mind and one heart - in an unbreakable bond of love. Jesus wants the disciples to have that gift of joy, so he prays and asks for them to receive it.

Protection. Joy made complete. And now Jesus asks that the disciples will be *“sanctified in the truth”*. Something akin to - “Abba, please let these precious ones be made holy in the truth of who You are – Eternal Love, always reaching out for them. Abba, I want them to share with us that bond of Divine love.” Jesus is praying that the disciples will grow in grace - grow deeper, stronger, and more mature in their ability to receive and extend God’s love, just as they have seen Jesus do.

Jesus prayed for his disciples to receive protection, complete joy, and to be made holy in love. And then he said, ***“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.”*** You might not have known this, or like me, never really paid much attention to this part before. Jesus prays in this petition for ALL future disciples, all who would come to believe through the witness of those first 12 disciples. Which means Jesus was praying for those who have helped US come to faith in him – the long line of faithful ones through the centuries, for our grandparents, parents, Sunday school teachers & mentors. He prayed for US, as well as the ones who will come to meet Jesus because of us.

There is good reason to believe that the disciples on this their last night with Jesus were not feeling like “one”. More likely they were frightened, uncertain, insecure, scrappy, and squabbling. And yet, Jesus prays in faith and with confidence, expecting there will one day be fruit as a result of his three year relationship with the twelve. And the thing he asks for all the disciples yet to come is UNITY, oneness.

Jesus opens his heart to Abba Father and asks that his hope, his dream will one day become a reality. Jesus prays for the COMMUNITY of the faithful. Solitary followers and spiritual lone rangers will have an impossible time trying to follow this Way – the Way of living sacrificially, loving passionately, and tenaciously holding on to faith in God’s love, especially when things get tough and there is temptation to give up because it’s so hard.

Jesus’ prays for us, for our unity, which is different from uniformity. One the strongest and clearest images in the New Testament for living into the life of Christ is the apostle Paul’s description in I Corinthians 12 of the church as Christ’s body. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’.” As part of Christ’s body we are one in him, whether we agree with each other or not. We are one in Christ, part of his body, whether we like one another or not. An older and mature believer once said in a very honest moment during his prayer time, “Lord, you know I love you. It’s just these people down here that I have a problem with.”

Jesus must have known on some level how hard it would be for us flawed and imperfect human beings to live his way of self-giving servant love. There were no heroes or

geniuses in that original company of 12. Probably you couldn't find a group of people more ordinary and unpromising. In turn they would show human weakness and disappoint him. One would show treachery. Fear would make them all deserters. Peter would deny Jesus and bitterly regret it. Two, the brothers James and John, would display naked ambition and lust for personal advancement. Some would ask questions that showed their inability to hear Jesus' words in any comprehending way.

Only the Spirit of the risen and ascended Christ can bring about the unity for which Jesus earnestly prayed. The Catechism in The Book of Common Prayer asks: "What is the mission of the Church?" The answer: "To restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

I invite each of us to think and pray in the coming week about where we need to be made more whole as individuals, and where we need to be made one in our common life as a parish. To help with this, you will find in your bulletin an insert sheet containing a list of questions\* that God wants to ask each of us. Read over the list, and choose 2 or 3 questions to sit with in your prayer time each week, for the next month. These questions can help you in your journey toward greater wholeness. Imagine that Jesus is praying for you and me as we do this, because Jesus absolutely continues to love and care for us. Be assured that the Holy Spirit will be present to teach and guide, working to heal and restore us. And know too, that the heart and mind of Jesus always moves us to new life and new ways of being. It's the Resurrection effect. Thanks be to God!

*\*[List of questions appears on the following page]*

## **QUESTIONS OUR GRACIOUS GOD ASKS**

1. Will you believe that I love you without any reservations?
2. Will you trust me?
3. Will you let me be your strength?
4. Will you let go of your own strong control?
5. Will you believe in your own giftedness?
6. Will you walk with insecurity for a while?
7. Will you believe that I am inviting you to greater wholeness?
8. Will you allow my grace to move within you?
9. Will you open up your heart?
10. Will you come to me in prayer so I can empower you?
11. Will you be vulnerable with me?
12. Will you look long at my love for you?
13. Will you place your hand in mine?
14. Will you give me your life?
15. Will you take me to places in your heart where you hide out?
16. Will you unburden your heart to me?
17. Will you talk with me about what is really difficult for you?
18. Will you thank me for always being there for you?
19. Will you recognize your own weak areas?
20. Will you take shelter in the home of my love?
21. Will you wait patiently for me to revive your spirit?
22. Will you say yes to the growth I offer you?
23. Will you be there for someone to lean on today?
24. Will your spirit open up to my consolation?
25. Will you rest your weariness on me?
26. Will you give me your ache so that I can heal you?
27. Will you bring me your anxieties and concerns?
28. Will you accept my compassion?
29. Will you share the strength I've given you with someone else?
30. Will you receive my love?
31. Will you taste the nourishment I have for you?
32. Will you be quiet enough to hear me?
33. Will you trust me to raise up the good things in you that have died?
34. Will you accept my mercy?
35. Will you believe in the power of my resurrection?

Questions are from the book *May I Have this Dance?* by Joyce Rupp, Ave Maria Press, 1992.