

**May 13, 2018**  
**7th Sunday of Easter**  
**John 17:6-19**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

We place a high premium on people who are experts in their field, those who excel at the most advanced levels of their calling and life's work. Have a medical issue? We want experienced, renowned and top-rated specialists to provide our care. Need to raise or invest money? We want a financial consultant with experience and who is knowledgeable, continually learning. A person with integrity - a man or woman we can trust. When something goes wrong with my car, I want someone who is trained and has had experience working on Subarus. If we want to learn to play a musical instrument – we ask others what teachers they recommend. We look for a reputable teacher who can both teach and play competently the instrument we want to learn.

What about experts in prayer? Do you know any? Prayer, simply put, is the lifeblood and the oxygen of the spirit. Prayer is at its root the human desire for God, the longing for connection with the Divine. So think back over your life. *When and how did you learn to pray?* There must have been a few experienced learners you encountered, some wizened, faithful, practicing pray-ers.

Our early years, up to age five are so powerfully formative. In the Evangelical United Brethren church (later to become United Methodist) in which I grew up, the congregation shared communal prayer when we gathered, as well as individual extemporaneous prayer. I heard Sunday school teachers and lay leaders pray aloud every Sunday. I am grateful I was raised in a home where I regularly heard my parents pray aloud, simply speaking to God what was on their hearts and minds – their thanksgivings and concerns for the needs of others, their requests for forgiveness and guidance.

Prayer is something that is elusive and pretty often a mystery for most of us. On the whole everybody thinks that everyone else knows more about it, does it better and more regularly. There tends to be a lot of guilt about it. Many of us at some point have even wondered whether prayer really means anything, or if it is just wishing in religious language.

Prayer was a formative part of Jesus' life being raised in the Jewish faith tradition. The gospels show that prayer was a necessary and vital practice in Jesus' life as an adult. And particularly from the perspective of John's gospel, prayer was at the root of Jesus' sharing intimacy with his Abba.

Have you had the experience of hearing someone pray aloud for you? Let's try to put ourselves in the disciples' place as they hear Jesus talking to God, praying for *them*. Things are weighing heavily on Jesus' heart as he is soon to part from his friends. Anticipatory grief and foreboding hang heavy in the air, even as they have shared a last supper together.

He will soon leave them, these disciples with whom he has shared an intimate life for three years. He loves them as his deeply and dearly beloved friends. He loves them and he loves his Abba, so of course he brings his concerns for them into his time with God.

Some fifty to sixty years later, John's faith community will be facing its own hardships and persecution, amid conflicts and confusion. They believe this prayer of Jesus is meant for them, too. It buoys their spirits to hear Jesus' words offered for them, long after Jesus had first prayed them. This prayer in John 17 is for every single believer who has come after those first disciples. Which means the prayer is for us as well, and those who will come after us.

Jesus begins by acknowledging the disciples' faithfulness, "those whom you gave to me have kept your word." He is grateful for them. And then Jesus asks for four specific things on behalf of his disciples. First he asks that they be united in God's name, even as he and God are one. Every faith community needs reminding that what we do as a worshipping community we do in Jesus' name. We may have different ideas about how and when to do things, as well as different ideas about who does them. We may have hopes and plans that seem to clash and may cause some friction at times. But what unites us is our goal of carrying out God's will. And God's will is to love. As long as we do not lose sight of that we remain one. When we forget or ignore that fact, our unity is threatened.

The second thing Jesus asks is that the disciples may know the completeness of his joy – "have my joy made complete in themselves", as John writes. Jesus is talking about the joy of the resurrection, new life that comes always through some kind of death. The awfulness and the awesomeness of life are intricately intertwined in each of us. Joy is not about the absence of pain, struggle, and disappointment. Joy is about the certainty of God's faithfulness and steadfastness no matter the circumstances we face. This is what we acknowledge at funerals – that the pain of grief and loss is co-mingled with the joy of resurrection and life forever changed. Joy is fueled by the Spirit, who inspires hope and confidence that God is faithful in the midst of everything – including death. Our hearts get broken and will be healed, put back together and held together through the power of God's unending love. Joy is able to recognize and hold all gifts lightly and be grateful for them. Jesus' joy would be made complete in them

when the disciples began to let the power and love of God overflow through them to others.

The third thing Jesus asks is that the disciples be guarded from the Evil One – not taken from the world but protected while living in it. But who of us doesn't have an escape fantasy? We enjoy those brief respites - cruises, second vacation homes, swapping time shares, secluded cabins in rustic settings. We come to crave times away because we find ourselves exhausted with the world's ceaseless violence and corruption. The world feels so much like a merry-go-round that we want to stop and get off the ride for awhile. It's easy to give in to feeling despair over what seems like our inability to make a positive difference in the world. We long to get away from the pressures, distractions, and competing values that lure us from our efforts to live a faithful, holy life. In the history of Christianity, this is how monasteries and convents began, with believers wanting to live separated from the chaos, clamor and enticements of the world to focus on becoming more holy, committed, and deeply faithful.

When Jesus asks that the disciples be protected from the "Evil One", he is praying that in their days ahead, whatever they face, they will not be overcome by adversity. Jesus remained very much in this world, and was willing to challenge its values and usual ways of interacting. He was crucified because he stood up to corruption in human systems. He knew life would be difficult for his followers. As long as they could struggle, respond, resist, and persevere they would not fall into the clutches of the Evil One. As long as they remained capable of offering their struggle, pain, and fear to a loving God, they would not be overcome by the Evil One. We echo this part of Jesus' prayer every time we say in the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Finally, in this portion of Jesus' prayer he asks that the disciples be sanctified in the truth - that is, made holy so that their witness to the life of God as they experienced it with and through Jesus would be plainly seen by others.

This is a powerful living prayer we are overhearing. The things Jesus prays for have not yet come to pass. When Jesus prays that they may be one, they are not yet one. There is division and separation. When Jesus prays that they will remain in the world, he does so in the recognition that they might opt out of following his way. There is a desire to retreat from the world, so Jesus prays that they will be made strong to live in the world but different from the world. And when Jesus prays that they be kept from the "Evil One", it is an acknowledgement that the evil one regularly threatens them, so Jesus prays that God will protect and keep them safe.

Now there is a distinct difference between “praying in faith” and “having faith in prayer”. Praying in faith is grounded in faith and trust in God. Having faith in prayer can be a way of using prayer as a way to get the things we want out of life.

For Jesus, this is not about having “faith in prayer”. It is about “praying in faith”, trusting God to listen and care. It is to pray believing that the answer received will be an expression of God’s love for us, and the persons for whom we pray. The great gift of God in prayer is God’s very self. Whatever else God gives, no matter how significant, it is really secondary to the gift of relationship, of communion with God.

I attended a diocesan meeting of the Commission on Ministry earlier this week. Something happened which has never happened before in the time I have served on the Commission. At the conclusion of one interview with a person seeking to be ordained a priest, he spontaneously asked if we could pray, and he began to pray – for the work of the Commission – giving thanks for us and praying for guidance and wisdom in our work on behalf of the diocese. What a humbling and uplifting experience to receive the gift of another’s prayers for us.

As Jesus’ disciples, we *ARE* a “prayed for” community. Jesus’ prayers continue to be offered for us. Sometimes we are blessed and get to hear them through the voices of fellow believers.

United – one in Spirit. Sustained and sent into the world as messengers to share God’s love. Protected from evil. Made holy to reflect the goodness of God in all we do and say. These things happen only through grace, which is God’s doing. We may not become experts in prayer in this life, because we are perpetual beginners when it comes to attending to our desire for God. And the good news is that this is okay because God desired us first, and desires us more deeply than we desire God. This is what Jesus taught and lived. Somebody’s still praying for you and me. Meanwhile, it will ever be as St. Augustine said, that “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee”. Through the Holy Spirit’s power the risen living Lord even now, is praying for us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.