

Sermon – John 17:20-26
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“The Lord’s Other Prayer”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. You won’t be surprised to hear this, I hope, but I pray a lot. A *lot*. This is mostly due to my desire to be in relationship with the God who created me, who has redeemed me, and who desires to be in communion and conversation with me. But I’ll be honest. A big reason that I pray a lot is because of what I would lovingly describe as an occupational hazard. When I’m around, and it seems like a good time for a prayer, people look to me, or to one of my colleagues. Nothing wrong with that, of course; always blessed and happy to oblige, although I will parenthetically point out that the prayers of the pastors may seem more polished due to practice, they do not contain more power than your prayers, offered up to the God who created you, who has redeemed you, and who desires to be in communion and conversation with you. Anyway, I pray quite a bit. That’s probably why I love almost nothing more in life than to be prayed *for*. So it is that our bedtime routine continues to be one of the most important moments in my day. Yes, I pray for and offer blessing to my children. But so, too, do they pray for me. So, too, do they bless me, with freshly bathed fingers leaving cruciform tracings across my forehead. “Dad,” they say. “Remember that you are a child of God.”
2. As amazing as it is to have one’s five-year-old son pray for you, today’s gospel reading reveals a blessing yet more profound. We find ourselves once more in the Upper Room on the Thursday of the Passover. Jesus and his friends have shared his Last Supper; their Lord has knelt and washed their feet. For

three chapters, Jesus has given them instruction and promise. And now, in chapter seventeen, Jesus moves from talking *about* God *to* the disciples, and now begins to talk *about* the disciples *to* God. In other words, Jesus prays for them. This prayer, referred to as Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer" has power as does any prayer. But this prayer is all the more powerful because of the identity of the One who prays it, and because of the content of the prayer itself.

3. Whose prayer is this? Jesus', of course. And who is Jesus? While we know the answer to that question, it's good to listen in as Jesus speaks of his identity in his own words: "As you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me [so that our love] may be in them, and I in them." Quite straightforward, isn't it? It sounds like a Lennon/McCartney lyric: "I am he as you are he as you are me/And we are all together...I am the egg man/They are the egg men/I am the walrus/Goo goo g-jobb." Where John and Paul meant to obscure, however, Jesus means to reveal. Jesus, enfleshed and present in time and space, is also perfectly one with the Father who sent him. Their unity is perfect. Jesus not only prays for us, he is also one with the One who hears his prayers. In other words, when Jesus prays, we, with the disciples, listen in on the interior conversation of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And about whom is God speaking? You: the people of God, collectively and individually. God is speaking of you. The Lord prays *for you*. And if God is for you, who can stand against you?

4. And for what does Jesus pray in this intra-Trinitarian conversation? Today, for three things: that we would **believe**; that we would be in **unity**; and that we would live in **love**, with God and with one another. It's fascinating that Jesus prays for those who will believe in him, the crucified and risen Lord. I take great comfort in knowing that Jesus knows how hard it can be to keep faith – not simply to assent to the rather remarkable tenets of Christian

theology, but to live with abiding, faithful trust in Christ in all circumstances. How, for example, were Paul and Silas able to keep the faith, to pray and sing hymns, after being flogged and thrown into prison? Only, I think, because they knew that the One to whom they prayed was also praying for them. To know that we are held *by God* before the throne *of God* is to be free. As their imprisonment plays out, it becomes clear that it is not Paul and Silas who are truly bound and imprisoned. It is the jailer, and all who put their trust in someone other than God. Such faith is a tall order, and we could not do it on our own.

5. Bryn Carlson, a Lutheran pastor who spent the bulk of his career in prison ministry, speaks of finding freedom behind bars. New to a call at a maximum-security penitentiary, Pastor Carlson was overwhelmed by the nature of the crimes committed by the inmates, and took to hiding out in his office. That's when he met John, who was already ten years into a long sentence. John came into Pastor Carlson's office one day and said, "Rev., you ought not be hiding any longer." The chaplain had what he could only describe as an epiphany, realizing that his fears had kept him trapped in his office. As their relationship deepened, Pastor Carlson took the opportunity to ask, "How do you keep your smile, your equilibrium, in the midst of all this garbage going on?" John just said, "Rev. – come on now – of all people I should not need to explain that to you!" But explain John did, saying: Jesus' "death and resurrection was to set me free – not from the prison here all about me but from the prison my heart had been kept in." And that's it. We are all imprisoned, even if we move about freely. But in Christ, the One who is the Alpha and the Omega, the One whose life and death and resurrection fully contain our story, we are free if we believe. In this world of violence and mass shootings, of pain despair, it's not easy. So to help you keep the faith, Jesus prays for you, and sends the Spirit, too.

6. Given faith and the freedom it creates, we are prayed into unity. To be sure, the Body of Christ, the church in the world or just right here at Grace, looks anything but united. But Jesus prays for our unity, and in praying, Jesus creates our unity. Strengthened by his prayer for us, we can work to become united, to become more like what Jesus already says we are. And in the freedom of faith and the unity of sisters and brothers, there is love, that greatest of God's gifts, for love is God's very nature. We are taken up by Jesus' death and resurrection into the capacious relationships between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. No, we do not become gods, but we are made one with the living God. This God says to you today: "Come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." Yesterday, here in this room, two young people named Matt and Ellie were married, their lives literally joined together now as one. Yes, they are still two people. But they are also *not* two people, for they are one. Marriage is one of the many ways that God gives us a glimpse of what a life lived in loving unity and freedom will be like. This assembly is another, as here this morning – hard as it is to fathom – the God who created the heavens and the earth will soon come to you in bread and wine, connecting you to the crucified and risen Jesus, and to life together with one another. This is a life that transcends the prisons of this world, a death that defeats sin, death, and the devil. This is a life you can believe in.

7. If you are in some way imprisoned today, know first that God in Christ is with you in whatever that situation might be, and that you are therefore already free. Let the shackles fall. After all, Jesus is praying for you. Jesus is listening to you pray. Make known his name, and live in his love. For you are loved. And you are free, your life held safe forever in the life of the Triune God.
Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.