

Jesus Prays

John 17:1-11 by Patty Friesen (Aug. 9/15)

Jesus prays for us. John 17 is the prayer of one willing to lay down his life and complete God's work. We see how close Jesus is to God's heart as he hands those whom he loves back to God and holds God to God's promises for his disciples. But this prayer is timeless as Jesus prays into the future of the church, including this community. We are the community for which Jesus prays. We are the ones Jesus is praying for. Imagine how our self-definition would be changed if this was our starting point. Imagine our sign out front saying, Osler Mennonite Church, a welcoming community for peace that Jesus prays for. Other churches in town might say Jesus isn't praying hard enough!

In Jesus' prayer we overhear an intimate heavenly family conversation. We hear Jesus express vulnerability and dependence on God. We overhear Jesus' love for us. How important it is for us to pray aloud with each other and for each other and for our children and grandchildren. God doesn't necessarily need to hear our prayers for our grandchildren but they do. I'm here – presently Christian in faith and practicing ministry because I heard my Grandpa and Grandma Roth pray aloud for me every morning we were on the farm for summer vacation. Patrick says the same thing – that his summer vacations on the farm with his grandparents and their morning devotions with Rejoice magazine and praying aloud influenced his faith and ministry. Through their prayers, our grandparents communicated a love that they could not say aloud. And the same thing is happening in John 17 with Jesus and his disciples.

The most honest prayer in the Gospels is when the disciples say: Lord, teach us to pray. The disciples didn't know how to talk to God and we don't either. Like the Lord's Prayer, Jesus is teaching us how to pray here in John 17. He is showing us how to speak with God in such openness and desire that we talk our way into relationship with God and with those we are praying for. "Prayer is the irresistible urge of our human nature to contact and communicate with the source of love," says Sophy Burnham in the Path of Prayer. The first task of prayer is to experience intimacy and relationship with God. Like Anne of Green Gables says, "Sometimes I just feel a prayer."

How do we begin to feel a prayer when we haven't felt one for a while? It was wonderful to overhear the Vacation Bible School classes discuss how we know God loves us. Children don't spend much time questioning the love of God. They immediately respond with how they see God's love in creation, in the birds and flowers and clouds. I believe my first experiences of God were swinging in the poplar trees in my backyard and singing and talking to God, probably as a five year old. If we as children first experience God in creation – then that's where we need to return more regularly to feel prayers. Farm families may be more prayerful because they are in creation and sunrises and sunsets all the time but it may be a challenge for us who live in urban environments. We may need to get to the Meewasin River Trail to feel a prayer.

Thomas Merton, a Christian monk said, "Let prayer pray within you." He didn't teach a method of prayer. He spoke of an attitude of prayer, a practiced silencing of heart and mind and breathing that opens one up to God. Henri Nouwen says, "To pray is to walk in the full light

of God and to say simply without holding back, I am human and You are God.” Prayer is a declaration of dependence on God that requires humility and openness and confession.

The success of Alcoholics Anonymous lies in the Serenity Prayer, God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference. The AA prayer is a daily turning of our dependence on alcohol over to our dependence on God. AA teaches us that we are as sick as our secrets – what we try to keep hidden from God, ourselves and others and so the first rule of AA is openness and confession to God and others. An alcoholic friend expressed frustration at praying daily for God to remove his desire for drink only to find each morning his thoughts turning to Jack Daniels. Was God even listening? Later he realized that the desire for alcohol was the main reason he prayed so diligently. Persistent temptation had compelled persistent prayer. (Prayer, Yancey, p. 150)

The anonymous 14th century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* describes a place deep within our spirit. A place of encounter with the living Triune God that we access through centering prayer – a silent focus on scripture or mental images of God. Some of us may need more structure to help us pray – like using a prayer book. Henry Nouwen’s beautiful prayer books have helped me pray as have the Anabaptist Prayer Book with daily scriptures and prayers. Some of us may need a special place in our homes to pray. I have a nest – a special spot on the couch with a wool blanket from a former congregation that I wrap-up in and light a candle and I use an icon – a beautiful picture that I got in Greece that helps me focus my prayers. Some parents use the Examen or a way of examining the day and praying with children before bed that reflects on what went well during the day and giving thanks to God for

that and reflecting on what was bad and releasing that to God. Singing is another way of praying – especially for we Mennonites but that is harder to do alone than together.

The point of our personal prayers is to draw into this intimacy with God – to express our heartfelt desires and release our worries into God’s care. But it is also to create a quiet place of listening to God. It is in that place of open honesty before God that we can begin to see how we were too hard on our spouses or children or we are moved to contact a friend or we are stirred to something different or new in our lives. God doesn’t just want to be talked at – God wants to talk to us too. As Lily Tomlin said, “Why is it when you talk to God, it’s called prayer but when God talks to you, it is called schizophrenia.”

Through prayer, God wants us to be aware of what God wants to do in the world. When rock band U2’s lead singer Bono asked Desmond Tutu how he had time to pray while working to end apartheid in South Africa, Tutu was aghast and told Bono, “how else do you think we did this work?” Social change in the world has only been led by Christians rooted in prayer during the abolition of slavery in the US and the civil rights movement. Twenty-five years ago, the Berlin Wall came down as a result of candlelight prayer marches beginning in JS Bach’s church in Leipzig where Dennis and Margaret are visiting Keith and Merel and Ava right now. Ten thousand people came to walk and pray with candles in Leipzig in 1989 and then it grew to 30,000 and then 50,000 and then 500,000 as one million also marched in Berlin and broke down the wall. History belongs to prayerful intercessors, those who believe and act God’s future into being.

In his prayer, Jesus does not trust the church's future to the church, but trusts that future to God. Jesus' final words on earth are not last minute instructions what we should DO but who we ARE. We are to understand that our very life, identity and future rest in God's care because Jesus himself holds us and values us this much. Our future does not depend on our own efforts – whether or not new people come to church or our own kids stay in the church. Our future totally depends on what God is doing in each generation and it may not be the same thing for every generation. Mennonite historian John Rempel says the most faithful thing we can do is not do what previous generations have done but ask what new thing God is doing in our own generation and the generations coming after us. God will be doing something different for each generation than we have experienced ourselves. None of us know what that will be but like Jesus we should be praying for the future church.

When we hear Jesus' prayer we are given a glimpse of life with God that transcends conventional limits and expectations to a futuristic possibility and time in which God's governance and care is complete, and in which our experience of God's love is fully realized. We in God and God in us. A person prays, said Augustine, "that he himself may be constructed, not that God may be instructed." Meaning, we pray not to change God but to change ourselves. The most important purpose of prayer may be to let our true honest needy selves be loved by God. Psalm 103: God does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is God's love for those who fear God; as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us. As a parent has compassion on their children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear for God knows how we are formed and remembers that we are dust. Let us pray...