

May 8, 2016

Gospel: John 17:20-26

[Jesus prayed:] ²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that 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. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

²⁵“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

On Thursday I ran into a former parishioner who was a close friend of my late mother. She asked how I was doing, where I was currently working, and how the rest of my family was faring.

When she asked about my sister, who lives in Texas, I told her that Jane is really struggling with her health.

Then she said—which is typical of her—that she prays for my sister and me by name every day. As a mom herself, she knows well what a mother’s heart aches about and worries over. And as a veteran prayer, she doesn’t hesitate to get down on her knees and get specific with God.

The great Christian thinker Karl Barth of Switzerland once said that “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.” Yet prayer is not the last resort when the world is out of whack; it is both the first *and* the last resort. For the believer, prayer is the ultimate weapon in the warfare of faith.

The gospel brings us back to the night before Jesus’ death and his comments after the meal and the foot-washing. He enters into fervent prayer, praying for himself, for his friends around the table, and for you and me in today’s world. Mysteriously, he speaks of the world both as the place God loves (as in “God so loved the world”) and yet a hostile reality from which we may need protection.

We find ourselves listening in to something very intimate and very intense. And though he uses the word Father repeatedly, his own words are openly mothering in their care and concern. What mother does not pray that her children might get along and be one? When the kids are at each other's throats, a mother's prayers shift into high gear. So, Jesus himself prays about us, "that they may all be one."

Once I was part of a discussion on the nature of prayer and its various practices. Inevitably someone asked, "What if I find that I can't pray? What do I do then?" Everyone looked at me, the preacher in the group, but I was caught off guard. (Yes, I know me speechless?) But then my associate pastor—who sat in with the group, too—said quite simply and calmly, "Why not ask someone to pray *for you*?" And she meant to do so in your presence, not after everyone goes home.

Ever since, I have had the wonderful experience of having friends and fellow pastors pray for me in my presence, often over the phone in live conversation. Even the Bishop prayed for me over the phone when my mom died. She is that kind of soul friend. Dear friends, this is our calling at St. Matthew's.

Do you remember when Pope Francis came to America? What I really appreciated was that everywhere he went he not only said he was praying for the people, but also he asked the audience to pray for him. And in Washington, D.C. he added, "Even you are not someone who believes in prayer, may I ask you to send your good wishes toward me?" This is what we call a soul friend.

What if we had another mission statement at St. Matthew's, one different than the one posted inside the entrance to the parish hall and education wing? Instead of listing all the wonderful things we intend to do as workers for God and our community, it might say something like this: "We the people of St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church are a people for whom Christ prays."

What would change about our life together? What would change about how we go out into God's troubled yet beloved world?

Might we find ourselves in the midst of our daily work and mission speaking the words at the very end of the Bible from Revelation, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

AMEN

The Rev. John Berntsen