

Message for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year C (5/29/2022)
John 17:20-26

How does it feel to hear Jesus pray for you?

“[Father,] I ask not only on behalf of these [who are with me now], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word... that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” That we, like our ancestors in the faith, might be filled with the abiding love of God – that is Jesus’ prayer at the end of his life; in the Gospel of John, that is his last act of ministry prior to his arrest and execution. And, since the word of God is living and active,¹ Jesus’ prayer isn’t confined to the pages of scripture, but reverberates through space and time to embrace you and me.

So, how does it feel to hear Jesus pray for you?

Joy J. Moore, Professor of Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, tells the story of a mother and her oldest child on the night before he started middle school. Since he had previously been homeschooled, the boy’s first day of public school was a momentous event. And, as he got into bed, he asked his mother to pray with him. “Ok,” she replied, but before she could start in on their normal bedtime routine, he said, “No, I mean like you usually do after we go to sleep.” He told her that the children knew that every night after she had tucked them in, their mother would come back in and pray for them as they slept. And, “that had made such an imprint in his imagination,” Moore explains, “that that night, which

¹ Hebrews 4:12.

was a special night for him before a very big moment in his life, he wanted to eavesdrop when his mom prayed for him.”

That’s the privilege of the first disciples, and our privilege, too, as we overhear Jesus’ famous prayer in John 17. “[Father,] I [have] made your name known to them... so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them....” How does it feel to hear Jesus pray for you? Or, as Joy Moore puts it, “What does it mean to be able to eavesdrop when someone you trust is putting you before the God who keeps us?”²

The story of the boy and his mother stuck with me this week not only because it’s a memorable instance of the relational power of prayer, that is, the sincerity of our prayer when we commend to God the people we love, and the reassurance of hearing our loved ones pray for us. It also stuck with me because it reminded me of my own prayers for my children and their classmates, prayers that have been more agitated this week in the wake of yet another mass killing at a school. Isn’t it enough to ask God to open our children’s hearts and minds, that they might be eager learners and helpful friends? Isn’t it enough to appeal to God on behalf of their teachers and other school staff, that they might be renewed each day in wisdom and care for their students? Isn’t it absurd that we should also have to pray that they be shielded from gun violence?

² *Sermon Brainwave* #846, www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/846-seventh-sunday-of-easter-c-may-29-2022.

Prayers alone, of course, are not enough. It's only natural to feel helpless in the face of tragedy, to be uncertain of the way forward, to question if we have the power to make a difference anyway. Our prayers may be all we have to offer in a moment of crisis, yet they seem so feeble.

But, prayer is not magical thinking; it's not just an incantation to ward off the worst case scenario. The power of prayer is in the seed of hope that it uncovers, and the flourishing of hope that it encourages. With a cry or a whisper, prayer holds on for dear life to the possibility of tomorrow.

Bear in mind that Jesus' great prayer in John 17 is a dying prayer, an appeal he makes as he stares down the worst case scenario. At the end of his life, Jesus' highest hope is the love that binds divine Parent to Child, the same love that he desires for his followers in every time and place, love that death finally can't kill. And as the cross looms large, Jesus knows no better way to lean into that love than to pray for us, trusting that his prayer will echo down through the centuries to embolden our hearts, to sustain our hopes.

Our prayers may not be as refined as Jesus' prayer in John 17, but they matter nonetheless. Amid the wreckage of tragedy and trauma, we may be capable of no more than an exasperated lament; maybe our sighs are too deep even for words;³ maybe we forsake prayer altogether and rely on others to keep the faith for us. In any case, the prayers of the faithful are pronouncements of the

³ Romans 8:26.

world as we so desperately want to see it, even in light of the world as it is now, a world that is full of crosses.

And, even as we pray with our hearts and our voices, we also pray with our lives. When Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel returned from Selma, Alabama, having taken part in Dr. King's famous 1965 march for freedom, someone asked him, "Did you find much time to pray, when you were in Selma?" Rabbi Heschel responded, "I prayed with my feet."⁴

So, let us pray, friends, and let us act always on behalf of love. And in so doing, let us join our hearts to God's heart, and in lament or rejoicing, in strength of faith or weakness, one day to the next, let us become an answer to Christ's own prayer, that the love with which God loved him may also be in us, until we finally beat our swords into plowshares – our guns into gardening tools – until we learn violence no more.⁵

⁴ Rabbi David Kalb, [www.centralsynagogue.org/news/detail/pray-with-your-feet](http://www centralsynagogue.org/news/detail/pray-with-your-feet).

⁵ Isaiah 2:4.