

## ***Another Lord's Prayer***

***John 17:6-19***

***May 16, 2021***

Years ago an American pastor visited the church in London served by Charles Spurgeon. When the visitor noted that it was cold in the sanctuary, he asked if there was a heating plant. Spurgeon led his guest to a large basement room. He explained that before every service, 400 members met there to pray for their pastor and the salvation of souls. The pastor concluded, "This is the church's real heating plant."

Prayer was Jesus' source of warmth during the long nights he spent in communion with God. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, offering the model we know as The Lord's Prayer. Today we receive an insider's perspective on Jesus' own prayer life. We overhear a prayer Jesus offered for his disciples after washing their feet.

The seventeenth chapter of John's gospel is a prayer prayed by Jesus for himself, for his disciples, and for future generations of disciples. Imagine – Jesus prayed for us before our great-great-grandparents were even born! I hope that you have had the blessing of having someone pray for you, lifting you up into God's holy, healing presence, imparting the blessings of God upon you. Prayer for congregations and individuals has been one of the greatest joys of my ministry.

Jesus has spent three years with his disciples teaching, healing, and serving. In John's Gospel, his final act before his approaching death is prayer. The final impression the disciples will have of Jesus is prayer. Prayer is Jesus' lifeline to God, the Source of his life, teaching, and ministry. In intimate communion with God, Jesus is anchored in his identity and mission. Jesus desires for his disciples to have this kind of intimate communion with their God through prayer.

While it is an honor to have Jesus or anyone else pray for us, we also have direct access to God through prayer. When I was in college several students in my residence hall met weekly for Bible study and prayer. When a student was going through a difficult time, several of us would gather in a dorm room for prayer. One of our Catholic friends was astonished by these praying Protestants. Steeped in her tradition, she truly thought that only the priest could pray and that the people could only pray the Our Father or the Rosary. We Protestants were just as astonished to think that we could not pray ourselves, but that someone else had to pray on our behalf! It was a joy to watch my friend's prayer life grow over our

four years together, and to see her accept that she had her own direct prayer line to God!

One of the striking qualities of this prayer is the interrelationship between God, Jesus, and the disciples. God and Jesus have a deep partnership. Our tradition understands that Jesus is God incarnate, the Word made flesh come to dwell among us. Creator and Christ work together, and through the Holy Spirit they continue to be at work in our lives. Jesus reveals God's name and very essence to those given him by the Holy Parent. The disciples are recipients of the words and gifts passed on from God to Jesus. "All mine are yours, and yours are mine."

This inner life of the Trinity is a model for our relationships – both with God and with one another. Jesus' relationship with his disciples mirrors that inner life. Our relationships with one another are to have those same qualities: mutual support, nonhierarchical, interdependent, respect for differing gifts and graces. These qualities allow others to live into full personhood within a loving community of care. Jesus prays that we might imitate this holy communion in our relationships: "So that they may be one, as we are one."

One theologian illustrates unity by asking, "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but...each looking away to Christ." The Holy Spirit dwelling in us, abiding with us in love, equips us to be in tune with God as we yield to the leading of the Spirit. Yielding involves letting go of our ego, which takes humility. Ken Blanchard said, "Ego stands for Edging God Out." Being in sync with God's melody requires that we relinquish control, emptying ourselves so that we might be filled with the fullness of Christ.

One powerful way to grow in unity with one another is to pray for others. Prayer for others opens our hearts to their hurts, heartaches, and needs. Prayer softens the edges where we are prone to hardheartedness. When I pray for one who has hurt or offended me, I realize that they have experienced pain in their lives. They, too, are vulnerable, afraid, and uncertain – as am I. The shell that I've erected to protect myself from them is cracked a bit. The more I pray for them, the hardness melts and a tenderness arises toward them.

I invite you to pray for someone with whom you disagree, someone who rubs you the wrong way, someone who has hurt you. With time, observe how your thoughts toward that person change. A grand friendship may not develop, but perhaps respect and understanding can change the nature of our interactions.

This congregation has a Oneness in Christ statement, which reads: We affirm that all persons are precious to God and of sacred worth. God pours out amazing love and grace to everyone. We seek to be an inclusive church. We warmly invite into our life and mission all people without regard to race, nationality, sexual orientation, ability, age, gender identity, financial circumstances, or marital status. We are a large and diverse community of faith. We certainly do not always agree on theology or public issues. Our desire, however, is to build bridges of mutual respect and understanding. Above all, we seek to love one another as Christ has loved us. We are learning that the words of our founder, John Wesley, are true: “We do not have to think alike to love alike.”

Prayer for one another, including those with whom we disagree, is one means of building bridges of mutual respect, and even understanding. We can find unity even amidst diversity, if we seek to probe for the common ground that we share.

This congregation recently received an astounding gift of over \$1.2 Million to pay off the mortgage. We are extremely grateful to the donor, who wishes to remain anonymous. Some have said that we must treat each person as if they were the donor, for we do not know who it is, but it is one among us.

It reminds me of the parable popularized by Scott Peck. A monastery had fallen upon very hard times, reduced to only five monks, all well into their seventies. The order was dying.

Deep in the nearby forest was a hut frequented by a rabbi for personal retreats. Once the abbot visited the rabbi to see if he could offer any advice. The rabbi welcomed the abbot into the hut. As he heard the plight, the rabbi empathized and commiserated, saying, “Yes, the spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.”

The abbot and rabbi continued talking of deep things. Finally, when the abbot stood to leave, he said, “It is wonderful that we could meet and talk after all these years, but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there no advice that you can give that would help save my dying order?”

“I’m sorry,” said the rabbi. “I’m afraid I have no advice to give. All I can tell you, though, is that the Messiah is one of you.”

Upon his return to the monastery, the other monks were curious, asking, “What did the rabbi say?”

“He couldn’t help,” the abbot replied. “We just sat and talked. And as I was leaving, he said that the Messiah is one of us. I have no idea what he meant.”

In the days, weeks, and months that followed, the old monks pondered the rabbi’s words: “The Messiah is one of us. Do you think he meant one of us monks here at the monastery?”

“If he meant one of us, he surely must have been referring to Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

On the other hand, he could have meant Brother Thomas; he is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

“Certainly he could not have meant Brother Eldred! Eldred gets crotchety at times....But even though he can be a nuisance, when you look back on it, Eldred usually always has a valid point to make. Perhaps the rabbi did mean Brother Eldred.

“But surely *not* Brother Phillip; he’s so passive, a real nobody....But then, almost magically, Philip has this knack of appearing at your side just when you need him the most. Maybe Phillip *is* the Messiah.

“But of course the rabbi wasn’t referring to me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet what if he were? What if I am the Messiah? Please, God, not me; I couldn’t mean that much to you, could I?”

As they reflected, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the remote chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they each began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect as well.

Because the forest was so beautiful, people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to walk along its paths, to sit quietly in the chapel. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect which seemed to surround each of the elderly monks and which permeated the atmosphere of the whole place. There was something compelling, empowering about it. Without knowing exactly why, they began to come to the monastery more frequently to visit, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to share this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

In time, some of the younger men who came to visit began to talk more and more with the elderly monks. After a while, one asked if he could join the order. Then another. Then another. Soon, the monastery once again housed a thriving order, and thanks to the rabbi’s gift, became a beacon of peace, love, and hope.<sup>i</sup>

Such is the nature of the community for which Jesus prays: “so that they may be one, as we are one.” Prayer was central to Jesus’ union with God, and He desires that kind of intimacy with us. Prayer is a gift whereby we find union with God through Christ. Prayer is also a means whereby we can grow in unity and mutual respect for one another.

May we be heartened by Jesus’ prayer for us and claim his love for even us. May we draw close to Christ in prayer that by his grace we might recognize the presence of Christ in one another and grow in unity and love.

Holy Presence, You bless us with the person of Jesus and the abiding presence of the risen Christ. We are moved by the intimacy Jesus shared with You and his disciples. Draw us into deeper union with You and Christ, that we might grow in the likeness of Christ.

We lament the divisions that tear us apart from one another, from our neighbors, from persons of different faith traditions. We mourn the loss of friendships and relationships rent asunder. Receive our sorrow and confession of our role in the brokenness of our lives. Where it is healthy, guide us toward mending of divides. Expand our capacity to listen to and our willingness to listen to those who differ from us. As our unity with you deepens, align our perspective with yours, O God.

We lament the violence that has taken the lives of innocent school girls in Afghanistan, family members in Colorado, residents of Palestine, first responders, and too many others. Comfort all who grieve the traumatic loss of loved ones to Covid-19, tragedies, and other losses.

Offer shelter and hope to those moving from one encampment to the next. Guide them to stability and a place of rest. Grow our compassion that together our community might find ways to care for those in need.

Abide with all who seek the healing touch of Christ, lifting their spirits from the shadows of despair, strengthening weary bodies, and energizing minds with hope for the future. Encourage all who care for loved ones, that they might be vessels of your love.

Grant wisdom to our local, state, & national leaders as they tend to the needs of all persons under their care. Impart patience with one another as we navigate the challenges and opportunities of reopening. Shower your blessings of guidance upon this congregation. Bless Pastor Janette, Pastor Peter, and their families as they prepare to serve among us. Open our hearts and minds to your call upon this church at this time, O God.

We give you thanks for these holy moments of intimacy in prayer with You. We sense your loving Spirit and are refreshed by your caring embrace. We unite our voices with Jesus in praying as he taught, Our Father....

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<sup>i</sup> M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), pp. 13-15.