

“The Other Lord’s Prayer”

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“I ask that they may all be one.” John 17:20

Debie Thomas, a blogger I read regularly, wrote that she sat with today’s gospel reading for several days before anything really emerged. But in time, the words “I ask” all but leaped off the page, which surprised her. The context is worth noticing. Today’s reading is a portion of the larger prayer found only in John’s narrative; it is often referred to as Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer.” And this priestly prayer, that is, a prayer you’d expect someone standing at an altar in a temple to pray, is a part of what is called “The Farewell Discourses,” four long chapters (14-17). John, who doesn’t have an account of the Lord’s Supper, does tell us that Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, which the other gospels do not include in their Upper Room stories. So, as best we can tell, today’s reading is linked to that holy of Thursdays, the night Jesus speaks of Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial, and the promise of the *Paraclete*, a spiritual Counselor so necessary that Jesus says – “It is to your advantage that I go so the Spirit can come.”

And as time is running out, just before the arrest, Jesus looks toward heaven and prays. Commentators agree that this prayer is difficult to follow. This “priestly prayer” is not like the other Lord’s Prayer, the one we have all memorized and pray every Sunday. One writer puts it plainly: “It’s certainly not polished and poetic like the “Our Father,”... it’s long and rambling... meant, of course, for his disciples to overhear the words, but the tone so urgent and passionate that it is achingly private. Jesus is not teaching; he’s rending his heart.” With time running out, Jesus “asks.” He spends his final moments with his friends in prayer. Really? This one who heals and raises the dead and feeds the hungry prays now? What does this mean that Jesus would end his ministry acknowledging great uncertainty? Well, I guess it means that he, too, hopes when in doubt, and trusts when in danger.

And you? And me? Why do we pray? I suspect you do, even if you rarely talk about it or hope that others don’t overhear you. When emotions and words pour forth, well, are we not praying? Even Jesus asks. He asks God to do for his friends what he cannot do for them. When we earnestly desire something deep in our bones, something that we cannot bring to pass by our own efforts, we pray. We ask with sighs too deep for words, and we are in good company. Jesus prays: “May they be in us.” May they be one with us, know the depths of the love that created the world, see the glory that is all around.

In his book *Tokens of Trust*, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams writes: “Flowing through him is divine purpose and power and action.” Sure, we are big on all that. “But also flowing through him, there is flowing humility, responsiveness and receptivity.” Oh, when time is running out, we reveal, as Jesus reveals, our dependence on the One to whom we pray. Is this not one of the hardest things to do, to ask because we cannot make it happen on our own? I’ve listened to your prayers for five years, your “asks” for people and things you love but cannot fix on your own steam. We ask, and in so doing we entrust our deepest loves and greatest treasures, our hopes and dreams, to the grace and mercy of God.

To be sure, it is best not to claim to know how prayer works. I have never claimed to know, because I don’t. Does our prayer change God’s mind, you know, move God out of Park and into Drive or maybe Reverse? I know people who say they pray for parking spots in crowded lots, and sunshine for their picnics, and for certain Presidential candidates who will nominate certain Supreme Court Justices. How does prayer work? I don’t know. I still haven’t figured out how Christmas works; it seems nearly impossible for St. Nicolas to visit every house on a single night. I’m still baffled about how Easter works, how we visit the tombs of our fears and discover the birth of hope! How does Pentecost work, and will it work beginning next Sunday? We don’t know for sure.

Growing up in the church, I suspect most of us were told that if God doesn’t answer our prayers that maybe we have been more naughty than nice, or that we should pray harder, or that sometimes God simply says “No.” I don’t know about you, but none of those comments have ever seemed satisfying to me. You? Oh, prayer is so achingly personal and subjective. God’s “yes” in your eyes might seem like God’s very clear “no” to me, or perhaps the very thing that proves to your neighbor that God doesn’t even exist at all. How is this possible? Because, it is still up to us to make meaning out of what we experience. We are meaning-making people, and the work of making meaning is what we must do for ourselves.

But this is sounding too academic. Let’s just admit what C.S. Lewis once confessed: “I pray because I can’t help myself.... my need to pray flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping.” Do not we pray because we can’t help ourselves? In our lowest and highest moments, with words and without words, through laughter and tears, the yearning soul cries out and to the One with whom we are mysteriously one. This is what Jesus prayed we would one day know.

A favorite of many, the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic and English anchorite Julian of Norwich lived a difficult and yet blessed life, and she claimed to experience “showings” or revelations of Jesus’

love. After a serious illness, she wrote that that Christ is the one who connects us to the “great root” of our being. “We are not simply made by God; we are made of God. And we will know the One from whom we have come only to the extent that we know ourselves. We have come from God as one, and to God we shall return as one.” She was fond of the image of a knot. She writes: “Christ’s soul and our soul are like an everlasting knot. The deeper we move in our own being, the closer we come to Christ. And the closer we come to Christ’s soul, the nearer we move to the heart of one another. In Christ, we hear not foreign sounds but the deepest intimations of the human and the divine intertwined.”

“May they be one, as we are one,” Jesus asks. And it is so. Amen.