

## *Prayer of the Heavenly Parent*

A Sermon on John 17:6-23 by the Rev. Philip Major

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Our Gospel passage is a portion of Jesus' final prayer for his disciples. It describes the close relationship God has, and seeks to have, with us. Remembering the big picture of the Gospel of John, this chapter is the turning point, the inflection point in the story. Chapter 13 tells the story of the Last Supper and Jesus washing the disciples feet. Chapters 14-16 happen in the same location; Jesus delivers his final sermon as he and the disciples are sitting around the table. Chapter 17 happens in the same location. Jesus prays for his disciples immediately before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Let's consider a few important ideas about Jesus' prayer in chapter 17.

At our Monday Bible Study, people observed that this not a short, quick prayer. In fact, only about half of the prayer is included in the passage assigned for today and printed in your leaflet. Let's not overlook the obvious point, which is that the length of the prayer is an indication that Jesus truly cares for his disciples.

We also observe a pattern we've seen in other passages from the Gospel of John and the letters of John; the themes of the prayer are more or less braided together, in a sort of spiral pattern. Themes from previous chapters are raised again in the prayer, then reappear again several verses later. This method of repeating and weaving together a set of themes is characteristic of the Hebrew Scriptures, which were the only scriptures read by John's congregation.

We are sometimes frustrated when we are given one of these passages in John's characteristic, braided style. We might be frustrated with John's braided, spiral of themes because, as modern women and men, we expect to have mastery over the text. Our assumption is that we will be able to summarize the text, in the same way we might give step by step directions for assembling a vacuum cleaner or a lawn mower. But we do not have mastery over life, and our relationships with God are not like a set of directions for assembling a vacuum cleaner or a lawn mower. Life proceeds in a way that is like the prayer we find in today's Gospel passage. A theme comes up. Then it disappears, only to reappear a bit later in a slightly different way. The themes of life and love are woven together and are often difficult to isolate or describe in isolation from the other themes. We never have mastery over our lives or the practices of love. We can only return to the task, and seek to absorb a bit more, as we see the elements woven together in a new way.

Let's notice the placement of Jesus' prayer for his disciples. It comes at the end of his final sermon, right before his arrest, trial and crucifixion. This placement brings a deeper meaning. It's not obvious to you and me, but Jesus is following a Jewish tradition, where a leader would make a final address, and give a final prayer for his followers prior to his death. Jesus' first disciples and John's congregation would have noticed the parallels between Jesus' farewell address and Moses' farewell address, found in the book of Deuteronomy.

Jesus' prayer describes a God who is engaged in the world. Jesus says, *They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.* From this we understand that God is the one who gives. We belong to God. God gave us. The people in our lives have been given to us by God.

Let's notice that Jesus prays for the protection of his disciples. This is one of the primary themes of the prayer, as it was in the sermon that leads up to this prayer.

We observe that Jesus is praying for his disciples in the future as well as in the present time. In verse twenty Jesus says, *I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their message.* This future orientation is characteristic of the Gospel of John, in which depictions of God's activity in the past and future are woven into the current time.

Let's notice Jesus describes a very close relationship between himself and the creator God. Jesus refers to God as 'Father'. Not only that, but Jesus describes his relationship with God the Father as a relationship of unity, with the words "as we are one." Since you and I have read or heard these passages

from the Gospel of John many times, we are not particularly surprised by these statements. Two thousand years ago, this was likely a startling depiction of the relationship between Jesus and the one he calls 'Holy Father'.

In a parallel way, Jesus prays for close, mutual relationships among his disciples. Jesus says, *Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.* Jesus is praying that his disciples would not be divided and divisive, that they would not be working against one another.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Jesus describes the close relationship between God and Jesus' disciples. This theme is threaded through the entire prayer. The disciples do not belong to the world, they belong to God. Jesus says, *All mine are yours, and yours are mine.* In part of the prayer not printed in your leaflet, Jesus says, *As you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...the glory you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you ... have loved them even as you have loved me.* God loves us. God is seeking us.

I think it's interesting that people who study the Gospel of John describe this prayer as 'The High Priestly Prayer'. That title has never really worked for me. That might have something to do with the fact that the title 'priest' carries some baggage for me. I've known several priests that I were quite disappointing to me.

So, on this Mother's Day, I'd like to propose a new title for this prayer. I suggest we call it *The Prayer of the Heavenly Parent.* I'd call it *The Prayer of the Heavenly Parent* because it touches on all of the most important things we need as children, and, in a certain way, we never really stop being children.

One of the things I have noticed since my parents died is that, at some times and in some ways, we all need people who act like parents for us. This might be a controversial thing to say, because in the 21st century the cult of the individual is very strong. Some people seem to assume that an adult human is, and should be, a full, perfect, and complete person, all on their own, without much support from anyone. I disagree. As adults and as children, we need people who bring the qualities Jesus describes in the prayer of the heavenly parent.

As adults and especially as children, we need people who will give us at least a little bit of protection from the dangers of this world. As adults and especially as children, we need people who are thinking about what the future holds, and ways to support us in the challenges we will face in the future. As adults and especially as children, we need people who are not going to give up on us. We need people who show us they really care in the long-term about us.

As adults and especially as children, we need people who are not divisive. We need people who help us heal the divisions and wounds of our lives. As adults and especially as children, we need people who do not pretend to have mastery over us. We need people who are mature and support us in understanding that we never have mastery over our lives.

As adults and especially as children, we need people who help us to be patient. We need people who encourage us as we make our way through the spiral, braided pattern of life. We need people who support us as we encounter the same old challenges, again and again. We need people who encourage us to use and appreciate the same brilliant gifts we've been given, again and again.

As adults and especially as children, we need people who help us understand that life is a gift from God, and the gifts we've been given are given to us by God. As adults and especially as children, we need people who are close to us, people we can trust.

Today, on this Mother's Day, we pray to know the presence and love of the one who created us out of love and for the purposes of love. We pray for children everywhere, especially for those who are orphans and those who suffer from abusive parents. We give thanks for the people who have brought, and continue to bring, the gifts of the heavenly parent into our lives.