

Sermon, 7th Sunday of Easter, June 2, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”
(Revelation 22:13)

In the reading from the Gospel of John today, we come to the end of Jesus’ prayer for the disciples. The whole of John chapter 17 is sometimes referred to as the “Farewell Discourse” or the “High Priestly Prayer.” Although there is no description of the last supper in John—we have the foot washing instead—the context seems to be Jesus’ last meal with his followers before his death and resurrection. That Jesus is praying for the disciples is inferred from the fact that before he speaks, he looks up to heaven, directing his words to God.

We know from many Scripture passages, especially in Matthew and Luke, that prayer is important to Jesus. We see him seeking out times of solitude in prayer as he climbs mountains or even takes a boat out onto the water. When the disciples ask Jesus—somewhat wistfully as they want to be like John’s disciples—how to pray, he first instructs them to pray in solitude as he does by going into a room and shutting the door. Then he gives them specific words that express so simply and completely how we are to address God that we still pray them today as the *Lord’s Prayer*. And perhaps most movingly, we hear Jesus pray in his extremity in the Garden of Gethsemane: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” (Matthew 26:39)

Sometimes it is the only prayer possible... Not so many words in total, important as they are.

Yet, in John, we have an extended intercessory prayer prayed by Jesus on behalf of his disciples. It is an extraordinary thing to be prayed for. I have experienced the grace of having many people pray for me, sometimes with the laying on of hands, when I have started down a new path. It is difficult to describe or measure the results. There is no “cause and effect” as the world views things. Some, I may only know years from now. There is a certain vulnerability in seeking out prayer. I think of the spiritual: “Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer...” It is not always easy to ask. I think this is why Jesus tells us that we must become like children in order to enter the Kingdom. A confiding trust is required. I wonder how the disciples felt when Jesus prayed for them, before, during, and after. Before Jesus washes the disciples' feet John tells us, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” (John 13:1) Surely by now, the disciples have come to trust in Jesus' love.

Jesus is aware that he will be in the world only a bit longer. He has done the work of making God's name known to the disciples. He tells God that the disciples do believe that Jesus has been sent from God. Then Jesus does a profoundly loving thing: he asks that God protect the disciples in God's name, making them one. While the disciples will still be in the world, they are no longer “of the world.” Up

to now, Jesus has guarded them as the good shepherd guards his sheep. Even at the end Jesus cares for his followers in body, mind, and spirit. Jesus expresses joy that he is coming into his glory—an astonishing thing as he is about to be crucified—and asks of God that the disciples also know this deep joy. Jesus prays that the disciples be made holy by their trust in God’s word, God’s truth. John has come full circle, the first words of his Gospel being, “In the beginning was the Word...” (John 1:1)

Then Jesus says, “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:18) In this time of school graduations, maybe some of us have been pondering what it means to be sent out! However, we are not on our own. Jesus promises in the previous chapter that the “Spirit of truth” will lead us. (John 16:13) Then surprisingly and wonderfully, at the beginning of today’s Gospel, Jesus says this: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” (John 17:20-21) Jesus is praying for us. Jesus is continually praying for us. How is this possible? I think the key may lie in today’s reading from Revelation.

In John’s visionary imagery we hear Jesus say, “I am the root and the descendant of David.” (Revelation 22:16) The root *and* the descendant. It may stretch our imaginations to think of a time before Creation, a time when God and Jesus (and the Holy Spirit) were in perfect communion. Yet there was, *is*,

something powerfully creative in that “oneness” that called the world into being. It is the loving essence of the Triune God that continually creates us, prays in us, and leads us. As mind-bending as it may be, Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega. I find this immensely comforting. Jesus was there at the beginning and will be at my end, whether it is the beginnings and endings I know in this life, or the next. There is that beautiful prayer that we have from the Sarum Rite that has been set into a hymn:

“God be in my head
And in my understanding.
God be in my mine eyes
And in my looking.
God be in my mouth
And in my speaking.
God be in my heart
And in my thinking,
God be at mine end
And at my departing.” *Sarum Primer 1527*

The oneness that Jesus speaks of arises from God, it is not something that we humans can impose. It is eternal. To our eyes, maybe God’s Kingdom will always seem upside-down, a place where Jesus can be the root and the descendant. In one of Jesus’ beautiful “I am” statements he says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” When I am trying to grasp at elusive truths, I find it sometimes helps to look to art, poetry, or music. Instead of trying to make

everything fit in a logical way, I can allow disparate elements to simply abide together. The medieval mystics do this best of all.

Julian of Norwich expresses the idea of union with God beautifully. The divine act of creating this oneness she calls “oneing.” “The soul is preciousy knitted to Him in its making by a knot so subtle and so mighty that it is oned into God. In this oneing, it is made endlessly holy. Furthermore, He wants us to know that all the souls which are one day to be saved in heaven without end are knit in this same knot and united in this same union, and made holy in this one identical holiness.” (*Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 53)