

*April 17, 2014 Maundy Thursday Worship Service  
First Presbyterian Church (EPC), Bentleyville, Pa.*

*John 17:1-26*

*“The Prayer and the Promise”*

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There’s no such thing as a quick Passover meal. This particular Passover meal lingered longer than most, for the same reason old friends linger in the parking lot when they’re about to go their separate ways. At the start, Jesus told his disciples that he would not eat the Passover again until “it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.” (Luke 22:15-16) Halfway through the meal, Judas leaped up and ran out. The other disciples were baffled. John says that they thought he had been sent on some errand, because he had the moneybag. (John 13:29) But from that moment, time was short. Jesus had only a little left, and he used it to teach his disciples, to give them a final lesson before they were scattered.

Jesus gave them a new commandment: love one another. He told them that he is the way, and the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him. He promised that they would not be left alone, but that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide and dwell in them. Jesus told them to abide in him, like branches cling to a vine. He warned them that the world would hate and abuse them for his sake, but he also told them not to be afraid: he has overcome the world.

And then, before leading them out into the night, Jesus did one last thing for his disciples. He *prayed for them*. And not only for them, the eleven, but – he says in verse 20 – for all who would come to believe in him *through* their witness. For us.

The prayer itself is a prayer of consecration. Jesus is handing over to the Father what the Father entrusted to him – his people, his Church. On the one hand, this is a really intimate moment. We get a glimpse of Jesus’ heart, as he prays for those he loves. You can’t *help* but love someone who prays so beautifully, so effortlessly, so naturally. At the same time, this prayer is a promise. Just a little earlier, speaking to Phillip, Jesus said that “the words that I say to you I do not say on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.” (John 14:10) He told his disciples, “whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.” (John 16:23) Our hope in our *own* prayers is that the Father hears and answers for the sake of the Son. So to hear Jesus ask God the Father for something on *our* behalf is nothing less than a *promise* that it will be given.

But what does he ask for?

He *starts* by praying for himself. He asks the Father to glorify him, that he might glorify his Father. Now, that may sound a little abstract to us, or even selfish – this is a prayer for *his disciples*, right? – but notice *how* Jesus asks to be glorified: by giving eternal life “to all whom you have given him.” (John 17:2) The true glory of Jesus Christ doesn’t consist, at least principally, in his divine power, or his wisdom, or his equality with the Father, but in the *salvation of his people*.

According to the fourth chapter of Revelation, the angelic creatures who surround the throne of God in heaven praise the Father for the work of creation: “Worthy are you our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” (Rev. 4:11) But when they turn to the Son, they sing a different song – a “new song”: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and open its seals, *for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God...*” (Rev. 5:9-10)

Not only should this leave us in awe at the love of Jesus, but it should encourage us: Jesus *himself* counts his glory in the salvation of his people. That is where his heart lies. Consequently we should have no doubt whatsoever that he will do it.

Jesus’ second petition is directly related. He prays that none of those the Father gives to him would be lost: “While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.” (v.12) This is not a blanket get-out-of-jail free card. We’re still warned that “if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment.” (Hebrews 10:26) We’re called to obedience, not to be conformed to the passions of our old ignorance, but to holiness. (1 Peter 1:14) And yet *because* Jesus prays this, we have every reason to believe, to trust, as Paul did, that he is able to guard until his return what has been entrusted to us – that by his grace, he will bring us at last to the finish. (2 Timothy 1:12)

Jesus then goes on to pray for the *joy* of his people: “these things I speak... that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.” It was Augustine who wrote, “you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” To know Jesus, to love and follow him, is to discover an unbreakable joy, the joy for which we were created, a joy that will be found nowhere else.

Jesus prays that his people would be *sanctified* in the truth of his Word, which he already said is nothing less than the Word of the Father: “your Word,” he prayed, “*is* truth.” (v.17) The Christian is sanctified, declared holy in the sight of God, *through* the Word, which reveals Jesus,

the Word made flesh. Without it, we're a ship without a rudder, no different from the rest of the world, which doubts even the existence of truth.

He then prays for the *witness* of the disciples, who he has "sent into the world" (v.18), and for those who will believe through them. To be a follower of Jesus is to be a missionary. There are no exceptions.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, Jesus prays that his disciples may all be one – one not in name, or in nation, or in language, or in race, or – dare I say it – in denomination, but one *in him*, "just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us." There is some contention among Christians as to what that unity should look like in practice – should we all, as the Roman Catholics believe, be under one human authority, or should we, as some independent churches maintain, have no labels at all, and all just be independent Christians, or something in between? But this we can say with confidence: that the unity of the Church is not, first and foremost, a unity of organization, but a unity of *faith*, and a unity of *love*, a common trust in a common savior who calls us in common to love and serve him. If we are not sanctified in his Word, we will not be one. If we do not seek his glory together, we will not be one. If we are not united in mission, calling his people out of the world to follow their true shepherd, we will not be one. Seek Jesus. Grow closer to him, and you cannot help but grow closer to his people, wherever they may be.

This is Jesus' prayer for us, a prayer that is certain to be answered, because of the one who prayed it. Praise God. Amen.