

“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord, my soul to take.” “Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. Let these, Thy gifts, to us be blessed.”

We start teaching prayers very early don't we? And, we begin very early, to say our own as well. I remember saying prayers with my children as I tucked them in bed and their prayers for their pets, their family and friends, upcoming vacations or trips to the dentist. As we grow older we continue to pray for all kinds of things: for the safety of loved ones, for troubled relationships, for guidance, or for healing. We may also pray to pass a test we don't deserve to pass, to make a flight or find a parking place when it's our fault that we're running late, or even for misfortune to befall someone we don't like. Yes, people have told me that they've prayed for all these things.

That's why Jesus knew we'd need help with our praying. In today's gospel he gives it. He prays, out loud, in front of his disciples, leading them in prayer, to teach them, show them, how to pray.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels, his disciples ask, “Lord, teach us to pray,” and he responds with a model prayer, what we call the “Lord's Prayer.” “When you pray, pray like this...” he said. That's not in John's gospel, instead, there's this long prayer at the end, that Jesus' disciples overhear.

Another time, when speaking about prayer, Jesus promised, “whatever you ask for ‘in my name,’ my Father will give.” That's why, when we pray, we often end with the words, “in Jesus' name.” Sadly, for some those words have become a kind of formula, as if just saying “in Jesus' name,” assures that our prayer, even if its for help passing a test we deserve to flunk, will receive the response we want.

Of course, that's not what praying “in Jesus' name” is about. It's not about getting what we want. It's about seeking what Jesus wants not just for ourselves, but for those our lives touch, and for the whole world. And, whether we say, “in Jesus' name” or not, that's hopefully what we're doing, every time we pray, praying “in his name,” seeking to have our hearts and minds, our desires and wishes in tune with his hopes for our lives and for the world. Because when we say “in Jesus' name,” we're saying that we're trying to pray like Jesus, trying to honor him by trying to want what he wants. We're seeking an intimacy with God that will make us want God's way rather than our own way, an intimacy that reflects Jesus' own intimacy with God.

It's important to know that Jesus has prayed that we'd know that very blessing. In today's Gospel he prays that our hearts may want what he wants, so we'll show love and unity with one another, similar to the love and unity that he has with his heavenly Father.

Surely, Jesus wanted his disciples, and us to overhear this prayer, so that remembering it, could give us the strength, hope, and comfort that would come from knowing that he's asked God to bless us with something we dearly need.

Yet, perhaps he also let his prayer be overheard, so that it could challenge us, challenge us to want, to pray for, and to seek, the unity he counted so precious and knew we'd need.

If that's the case, and I'm preaching this sermon because I believe it is, it's a fair test for us to lay our prayers beside his prayer, and see the differences. When I do, I notice several things:

First of all, I notice that Jesus, moving toward his horrible death on the cross, prays for his disciples. Knowing the terrible ordeal that's ahead of him, you'd expect him to pray for himself, that his suffering would be eased, if not avoided. But he doesn't; he prays for his disciples.

We all know, most of our prayers are for ourselves. But Jesus prays for others. Here he prays for his disciples. Ironically, he prays for love and strength among those who'll soon betray and forsake him. Yet, even knowing how they'll let him down, he prays for them.

Interesting, too; he doesn't pray that they'll be protected from pain or shielded from suffering. He prays that they'll have unity with each other. He prays for them *as a group*, that *their group* of disciples will have unity and love, some of the unity and love that he has with his Father.

You might think, knowing the danger ahead, that he'd have prayed for their safety. But he doesn't. Even with the perilous future they face, what he prays for is their unity, that they'll love each other and stay together. He prays that the world will be able to look at their life together and see him through them. Even with what's ahead, that's still their mission, their witness for him in the world. They can only make that witness, *together*. Together! They can't witness to Jesus as individuals, as separate entities. They can only witness to him as a unity, a body, what Paul called "the body of Christ."

Our natural tendency is for our prayers to be very different, to be for our health and safety, or the health and safety of our family and friends, and such prayers are important and need to be said. They represent important concerns of our hearts and God wants us to share them.

Yet, as someone who's read the prayer cards, week after week, here at Bethany, for years, I rejoice to notice how they're increasingly enriched by prayers about our mission as the body of Christ, for the unemployed, victims of disasters or oppression, drugs or violence, for our IHN families, for those we love at Ponca Creek, and many others. Sharing in a growing sense of mission to the world around us is helping us look beyond our own aches and pains to pray for that wider mission to the world.

What's especially important, as our prayer focus expands from ourselves and our circle of loved ones, to include our mission to the world around us, is to see what Jesus views as the heart of that mission. We see it in his prayer today. He prays for the unity of his followers. That's the core of their mission! That's how "all will know that they are his disciples."

That's what Jesus wants for us! Being united in him, is the source from which all else must flow!

So we have to ask ourselves, how much is his hope for us reflected in *our* prayers, or in *our* actions? Do we even think about it? Sure, we pray for this, that, or another thing, "in Jesus' name," but do we ever ask for what he wants most of all for us, the unity he says is central to being his people? Rarely!

And I'd suggest that the lack of that concern shows, shows in the jealousy and competition, arrogance and distance, gossip and slander, which afflict every congregation. Those who pray "in his name," gather for worship, attend classes, share fellowship events or mission work, go each other's parties, outings, and weddings, send Christmas cards and birthday greetings, yet can say the most awful things about each other, commit verbal murder, really, and relish the excitement of it. What trust and respect is destroyed by such words, by desires to "take someone down a notch." What vengeance is wreaked upon those who are called "friends" and are trusting enough to believe it.

No wonder Jesus prayed for unity! He knew how much help we'd need. If only we could see how important it is, that most of what the world will know about him will come through, us, the church.

No wonder, that in today's gospel, Jesus prays for those who must believe through the witness of the church. And well he should, not because the world is so disbelieving and pagan, but because his church is so far removed from his spirit, his basic purpose, his central mission – being one in him.

Perhaps, that's why, in today's Gospel, Jesus doesn't pray for individuals but for a group. Most of our prayers are full of the first person singular pronoun – I, me, my. Yet, Jesus prays collectively, for all of us, for his followers *as a group*. He prays for their life, for our life, *together!*

A bible scholar was asked what he thought was our worst biblical misinterpretation. He answered, "We read the Bible individualistically but scripture was meant to be read communally, collectively."

That's why, as we, today overhear Jesus' prayer, we should affirm, celebrate, encourage and nurture, all we do that strengthens us as a community, gathered "in Jesus name." The visits, phone calls, and altar flowers delivered, the meals brought in, the faithful Sunday school attendance, the noticing and welcoming, the encouraging and disciplining of children, the sticking with a group, a class, a choir, a mission in spite of disappointments, and the forgiving of those who've hurt or angered us, while seemingly never noticed and rarely written about, are not small, trivial matters. They're central to our witness! They're the heart of our mission!

Unity, love for each other, and peace, are gifts for which we must pray. They're life and death matters for our faith family. To be a Christian isn't to cultivate your own solitary, pure, little spiritual garden, but to worry about your neighbor, your relationship to your neighbor, and your neighbors' relationships to each other. It's to know that those relationships are crucial, it's to invest yourself - time, talent and treasure - your patience and forgiveness - in them. It's to think communally. That's what Jesus does in this prayer.

Today, in this prayer, we get to listen in on one of his final conversations with the Father on his way to the cross. And what we hear is that he prays for us! That's good news!

And news that's just as good is to see how his prayer is being answered. We may not be a completely unified or faithful church, and yet we know that the things that make for unity and faithfulness are here - love, support, encouragement, compassion, care, patience and forgiveness, have all been given to help to make us "one" in Jesus.

Yes, the good news is that these gifts have come and continue to come. In other words, Jesus' prayer for us *has been, is being,* and we have faith, *will be,* answered. I suppose that means that every time in the church when we rise above being merely a gathering of like-minded and fairly likeable people and become the "body of Christ" he calls us to be, we ought to give thanks to God. We ought to give thanks that Jesus does not leave us on our own, but continually prays for us.

And now, let us pray, let us pray hoping that our prayer may honor his prayer for us. . .

Lord Jesus, you taught us to pray.

You taught us to come to you in our need, to speak to you about our cares and concerns.

You also taught us to pray for the cares and concerns of others, to make their pain our own, in prayer.

You also taught us, when we are praying, to listen.

Keep teaching us to pray, Lord Jesus.

Help us truly to pray "in your name,"

...by expanding our notion of family, so we may care for others, besides our own family and friends,

...and by listening.

We thank you for the example of your prayer,

...remembering us, even while you were in communion with your Heavenly Father,

...calling us to mind while in communion with the divine,

...praying in our presence so we may know we are loved.

We pray for our brothers and sisters in the faith, those we know now,

...and those we will know when all are gathered together, one in you, our Lord, and one in glory. May

their welfare and security become uppermost in our mind

...as we make choices in our lifestyles and in our living.

We thank you for your love, O Jesus, which, mere hours from the horrors of the cross,

...still kept us uppermost in mind,

...and prayed for us before praying for yourself in Gethsemane garden,

...giving us the best of your energy and attention,

...when so often we put off prayer and thanksgiving until we can barely keep our eyelids open.

May we all be one in you!

Let your will be done, now and forevermore.

With that prayer, that your will be done, we pray especially, today,

...that you would overcome our tendency to forget your hope and prayer that we might be one,

...so that we might never use lies, big or little, to make things easier for ourselves,

...but be willing to speak the truth, even when it's inconvenient, uncomfortable, or hard,

...and thus sow the seeds of trust upon which our life must be built,

...so that we might turn from all jealousy and competition, bitterness and revenge, gossip and slander,

...so that we might never again wear masks of friendship when we are with someone

...but speak murderous words about them to another.

Bless our children who face great challenges growing up in a world hostile to you and your way.

Bless parents with the grace and patience, strength, courage, and wisdom

...they need to nurture children in your way.

We pray for those known to us with special needs,

We pray also, for those with needs we often forget, and thus, often fail to lift up in prayer...