“God Prays Out Loud”

John 17:1-11

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You may have seen me post this on Facebook several weeks ago. My caption was, “How most of my prayers go.”



Several Pleasant Hill folks commented on this post. Kathleen said, “I start ‘Dear God,’ with such conviction and lucidity…and then…this.”

Dana said, “This is me also especially so in recent times. I end up settling with “Well, God? I’m here.”

And Bernie said, “I thought it was just me!” Bernie, it’s not just you.

These days, people are praying more. According to a Pew research study, more than half of all U.S. adults say they have prayed for an end to the spread of coronavirus. 86% of those respondents were already daily prayer, but 15% say normally, they seldom or rarely pray.

A pandemic, or any tragedy of a global scale likes this, brings out the prayers. But I’m guessing many of them look like that jumble of letters. There’s so much to cover!

What each person’s prayer looks or sounds like varies from person to person. Some quietly lay in bed and let their prayers swirl in their head. Some journal them. Some meditate. Some walk and pray as they go. Some pray out loud. Whatever the form of your prayer, in the last few months, it has probably included something along the lines of, “God, end the spread of this virus. Help our scientists find a vaccine. Bring us back together.”

According to the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession, “prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, in the name of Christ, by the help of his spirit, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.”

We worry that our prayers don’t have the right words, aren’t “holy” enough, aren’t frequent enough, aren’t enough. Friends, if our relationship with God depends on getting the words right we’re in trouble. But mercifully, It’s not about what we say. As we fumble with our prayers and worry about their efficacy, Jesus is praying. Jesus is praying out loud, expressing God’s desires and hopes, on our behalf. Jesus is praying for us.

In the assurance of forgiveness this morning, you heard Pastor Katie say, “Christ prays for us.” And in our scripture from John today, we hear a little of what that prayer might be about.

In the book of John, Jesus has a lot to say to his disciple

s at the Last Supper before his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrectio4qn. This section of John is known as “the farewell discourse.” It seems Jesus was trying to summarize all his most important points to make sure the disciples heard it one last time. Some of this will sound familiar:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

“I am the vine, you are the branches.”

“This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

“A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me again.”

And then he ends with prayer. This is the last conversation he has with his disciples before Judas betrays him into the hands of the Roman soldiers. He uses his last moments with them to pray, out loud, with them and for them. And we have the privilege of getting to eavesdrop on this intimate moment, a moment that isn’t just for the disciples, but for us as well.

I imagine the disciples were feeling a little antsy at this point. They’ve been sitting for awhile. The wine is running low. And then Jesus begins to pray, “Father, the hour has come…” Surely this isn’t the first time the disciples have heard Jesus pray. But I imagine that they, too, can sense that there’s something different about this one, and a stillness settles over the room as they listen into God’s own prayer, God’s own desires and hopes. A holy and uncomfortable moment, as they listen in on Creator and Son.

To be on the receiving end of a prayer with a direct message pointed at you can feel uncomfortable.

We’ve all heard prayers that have a point for someone listening. Does this sound familiar? “Mommy’s going to say the prayer before dinner tonight. Dear God, thank you for this food. We are so grateful to even HAVE food. Help us ALL to eat EVERY LAST BITE tonight and be GRATEFUL for what we have. AMEN.”

Like a parent loudly praying that their child will eat their dinner without complaint, Jesus wants ***us*** to hear him praying out loud.

Jesus first prays for himself.

“…glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, **2**since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. **3**And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

It’s a little mind-bending to think about God praying for God’s-self if God is all powerful and all that…don’t hurt yourself trying to make that make sense. Jesus’ prayer is both personal and public, an honest offering of his hopes and desires that he feels deeply in his bones, and wants the disciples to hear too: Because they know Jesus, they know God. And in knowing God, they know eternal life and love.

In the second half of our reading from John, Jesus shifts from praying for himself to praying for his friends.

**“ 10**All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. **11**And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Jesus prays that in knowing God, the disciples will glorify God, making God’s presence visible to all-finding a unity with the world that reflects Christ’s own relationship with God.

Prayer is not a series of magic words, even for Jesus himself. Just because we say them out loud does not make them more powerful or likely to be answered. But when we do overhear a prayer, hearing the deep desires of another, we are invited into a different level of relationship with them, a level that gets us moving.

One of the privileges of being one of your pastors is having opportunities to listen in on your prayers. Lately in our youth group Zoom time together, we’ve been using the chat box to pray. I’ll start us off out loud with something like, “God today we’re worried about…” And then everyone will type their prayers into the box. When we meet together in person we pray together. But often those pauses when each person has the opportunity to say something out loud are long and silent. Something about that chat box has opened up our vulnerability with one another, to pour out a flood of prayers, for all present to read. We learn about one another’s fears and hopes. And we trust that God reads the chat box too. With the words we have read, we have another reason to connect and check-in with each other, and our connections strengthen.

Jesus didn’t have Zoom, but in his out-loud prayer, he makes clear to his disciples and to us today that he cares for us enough to stake his life on us. Jesus’ out-loud prayer brings us into deeper relationship with him as we hear his deepest desires, God’s deepest desires: that we know God’s way of love through knowing Jesus, and that we glorify God, making God’s presence visible to ALL people. When Jesus prays out loud, his prayers don’t end with sitting still.

I’ve heard several people say lately, “Right now, all we can do is pray.” I’ve struggled to hear that, because my first reaction is “no.” I want to do more than pray. The phrase “thoughts and prayers” is one that has been dragged out far too many times in response to tragedies, when what is needed is also presence and action. I want a plan to follow. Prayer doesn’t feel like nearly enough to me. I’m antsy.

In our story from Acts today, we hear a question we’ve been asking a lot lately. “Is this the time?”

In the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, we ask often and loudly, “Is this the time?” Is this when we can return to normal? Is this when we can reopen the church doors? Is this when we can go back to school? Is this when I can stop worrying about having my mask in the car? Is this when I can walk the aisles of the grocery store without fear? Is this when I can hug my grandparents again?

With a cryptic answer of “It’s not for you to know,” Jesus ascends into heaven disappearing from sight, leaving the disciples to wait for what’s next. (Spoiler alert-it’s the fiery coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, come back next week for that story). The disciples know that being a follower of Jesus won’t look the same as it did before, when Jesus walked with them on earth. But they just don’t have enough guidance to figure out where to go with all their grief, excitement, belief, and anticipation. So while they wait, they return to where they came from and wait together. And they pray.

Perhaps this is a time that’s something like the time between Jesus’ ascension and Pentecost. A time we are called to return home and pray. A time we are called to reconnect with friends and family. A time that will mark the ending of one way of life and the beginning of another. A time of regrouping, restructuring and rethinking the ways we do things. Christ prays as his final act with his friends during his ministry on earth. So if we say that all we can do is pray, then we must take a page out of Jesus’ book (ha) and pray out loud like Jesus, echoing God’s deepest desires for us: that we know God’s way of love through knowing Jesus, and that we glorify God, making God’s presence visible to ALL people.

I needed to read this week that God prays for me. Out loud. God prays out loud so that I can learn something. God prays out loud so that I can know I am loved. God prays with hope. With care. God prays so I can know God’s desires for me.

A picture containing sitting, table, food, cake

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If you read on past verse 11, you’ll see that Jesus’ spoken prayer goes all the way to the end of chapter 17. There is nothing to mark that this prayer ends. The next sentence reads, “After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden,” In the garden awaits Judas, and the events of the betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection unfold without another pause. There is no “Amen,” because Jesus’ out-loud prayer is now becoming embodied, as God’s presence is made visible for all.

So maybe for this week’s prayer, I’ll bring some order to my jumble of letters, and instead of trying to come up with the right words for God, I’ll start with God’s words for me.

And I’ll leave out that ‘amen’, because when we pray out loud, letting them loose for all to hear, we won’t be sitting still for much longer.