

When we come together on Sunday mornings to worship, some of our time is spent in shared or common prayer, such as when we pray the collect of the day, or the prayers of the people. Prayer has been called “the language of the Christian community.” Prayer is how we attempt to understand God, and to comprehend what God would have us do and be in our life.

I would like you to think for a moment not about our shared prayers, but about your individual private prayers. When you pray on your own, privately, what sorts of things do you pray for normally? Are there particular patterns, practices, or routines that you follow when you pray in private? Are there similar questions, or requests, or thanksgivings, or complaints, or worries that appear repeatedly in your prayers? Can you identify one overarching idea or principle that best describes your private prayer life?

In the four gospels of the New Testament, it is always Jesus who is described as praying, not other people. Jesus is presented as praying on a mountain, or praying at night, or praying while his disciples slept, or while they were feverishly rowing their boat into a headwind at sea. There are many accounts in the Gospels of Jesus praying in private, just as he taught his followers to pray, and just as you also sometimes pray in private. But the scriptures, for the most part, tell us only that Jesus *is* praying, not *what* he is praying. Only during the last week of Jesus’ life do the gospel writers turn up the volume so that we can hear *what* Jesus is praying.

Today’s gospel reading is part of the “Farewell Discourse” that records the final night of Jesus’ life before his arrest and crucifixion. It has been the focus of the gospel readings for the past few Sundays. During that momentous time and place, Jesus prays. He asks God that the glory that had been given to himself now be given to the disciples, and that they be united just as Jesus and God are united.

Jesus also prayed – and this is the part that directly includes you and me today – he prayed for the community of believers in Christ who would follow over countless years to come. He prayed for all people, of every time and place, who would come to believe in him through the testimony of his disciples, proclaimed in every time and place.

You see what Jesus did. As incredible as it seems, Jesus included you and me in the final hours of his life. In that upper room where the Last Supper was shared, Jesus looked into the future, and he prayed for us. Long before we were born, Jesus prayed for us. He prayed knowing that inevitably in our lives we would face ups and downs, hopes and disappointments, aspirations and commitments. Jesus prayed for us, knowing that we would at times yearn for meaning and purpose in life, which often is the reason why *we* pray, isn’t it?

What else did Jesus pray for that final night of his life? As we heard in the gospel reading, Jesus asked God that all who believe in him for ages to come will become one people, unified, just as Jesus and God are one. Why did Jesus focus on our unity as Christians? He made the point, in one of the last messages he left us mere hours before his death, that it is through our unity, our acting as one Christian body with each other and with God, that the world will come to believe that Jesus was indeed sent into the world by God. If the rest of the world, looking at us as Christ’s followers today, does not see a unity of love and spirit and acceptance among us, then what hope is there that any other part of Jesus’ message will be accepted by a world growing increasingly sceptical of the worth and credibility of Christianity?

In many of the places we live our lives it can be difficult to be united. To be as one. To get along. In our homes, our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, the many other places we gather with people, and even in our churches, unity sometimes can seem difficult to achieve. Jesus’ prayer on the final night of his life was a call for all people who claim to be Christian to do better and to always try harder at being kind to one another.

To try harder at being more accepting of our differences with other people.

More patient with those whose views are not our own.

More careful about ensuring the words we speak to each other do not cause injury.

More willing to place others before ourselves.

Less insistent on having our own way.  
Less inclined to become bitter and divisive when decisions do not go our way.  
Less envious and critical of others.

There is a tale about a religious man who was very much loved and respected, and who possessed extraordinary powers that allowed him to do all sorts of wonderful things. Then he began hearing stories about another person who could do even more wonderful things. This troubled him, so he set out to find this other person. Finally, they met by the side of a lake. It so happened that just as they met it was also time for their midday prayers. The man took out a prayer mat and flung it out on the water. He then walked across the water, sat on the mat, and said his prayers, all the while floating on the water without sinking. It was amazing. He turned to the other person, the one he envied because of her reputation for doing wonderful things, and he said to her, “Can you do that?”

The other person proceeded to unroll her prayer mat, and with a flourish she threw it into the air, where it remained, suspended. Then, climbing an invisible staircase, the woman sat down on the mat and said her prayers, all the while floating in the air. When she finished her prayers, the woman descended back down the invisible staircase to the ground and said to the man, “You know, what you and I have done today, floating on water without sinking and remaining elevated in the air, those are things that even the lowly fishes and birds do every day. Rather than trying to outdo one another,” the woman said, “would it not be better if we could learn instead to treat each other as human beings?”

I cannot speak for you, but I know that I need to be reminded regularly of John Wesley’s words about treating others. Wesley was the founder of Methodism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He said: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

Let’s be clear: Jesus’ prayer for unity was not a prayer for uniformity. Being one Christian people does not mean eliminating our differences and losing our identity or individuality. Unity does not mean all of us being identical, always thinking and desiring the same things. Not at all: how boring and uncreative life would be if we all were alike. Jesus does not pray that all our differences with other people will be eliminated. No, he prays for our oneness. He prays that we will become one as he and God are one, so that our oneness amid our vast differences will be the proof of God’s presence in the world.

Finally, we should also note that in his prayer Jesus asks God to allow the disciples, and us today, to share in Christ’s glory. What does sharing in Christ’s glory mean to you? Look at it this way:

I read about a man, a banker, who was a deeply faithful Christian. In the bank where he worked, the man became aware that a type of discrimination was occurring, although it was taking place very quietly and largely out of sight. The practice in his bank’s loans department was to deny loans to people who were members of certain ethnic minorities. Such discrimination is, of course, unethical and in some circumstances illegal. The man was certain that the bank where he worked was violating the spirit, if not the letter, of the law.

First, he did what I hope all of us would do when faced with a problem. He prayed about it. Next, he decided to complain about these unethical lending practices to the bank’s senior management. He presented the necessary financial statistics to prove that his complaint was accurate and valid. The man did not make a big public fuss. He was not trying to stir up trouble. He simply encouraged the management to change its practices.

Exactly one month after he went to management, the man was fired. The bank said that they were going through some sort of reorganization, but the man knew the real reason why he was fired. The man was out for work for more than seven months. When he finally got another job, it was a big demotion from his previous job at the bank: it came with less responsibility and less money. People he knew said that he was going through a period of bad luck. Many acquaintances, trying to be helpful, told him, “I know this is a hard time for you.”

Jesus, by contrast, said to the man: “Well done, good and faithful servant, this is your hour to share in my glory.”

Too often, the focus of my personal prayers is “me,” “my,” and “mine.” The prayer that Jesus prayed that final night of his life challenges all of us, during our personal prayers, to pray for our unity with others and to pray wholeheartedly for others. Because when we lose ourselves in the hurts and joys of others, that is when we discover the type of person, the type of Christian we truly are. That is when, in answer to Jesus’ final night of prayer, we become one with Christ and share in Christ’s glory. **Amen.**

**7 Easter**

**29 May 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming**