

The Prayer We Need to Hear

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Third Presbyterian Church
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John 17:6-20

I have tried to ban the word “busy” from my personal vocabulary, for so often we use the word as a badge of honor. As in: “Oh, I’m so busy! I’m in such demand.” Among aspiring overachievers, whoever is busiest wins, right? Even though there is no grand prize..

So I’ve tried to shift to describing my life as “full,” doing the things that are meaningful and things that I choose to do. Not that it helps much. I often tell folks that I’ve always got 20 different things to be doing at any one time, all important, and I pray to God that whichever one I choose is the right one in that moment. And then I ask forgiveness for those I’ve neglected.

As followers of Jesus, it seems there is so much for us to **do**, as evidenced during the church recognition months of May and June. We are a church committed to social justice and outreach. So we feel that urgency on a daily basis, especially in this city so segregated by race and class. We are a “doing” congregation – that’s how many of us in this place are most comfortable expressing our faith.

We have a long list of things to do that we’ve been doing for a long time: rooms for homeless RAIHN families to prepare – can you believe another rotation starts this afternoon! In just a few hours we will inflate air mattresses, set up lamps, roll out rugs, and fill the refrigerator.

There are also food cupboard shelves to stock, dining room ministry meals to prepare, and community garden beds to weed. There are children to tutor, and enrichment programs to plan. There are Habitat homes to build; and the People’s Emergency Fund to administer. There are Grocery Run sponsors to find; public forums to plan, and advocacy letters to write.

And if that’s not enough, we keep finding new things to do: a new mission center to launch; Puerto Rican hurricane refugees to assist, a new ministry partnership to form.

That’s just the Outreach arm of this church. Then there are people to encourage; struggles to listen to; and families to support. There are Bible studies to have; choir anthems to practice; bells to ring, and worship to prepare. There are babies to baptize, children to teach, youth to commission, mission trips to organize.

We have to run the church: there are meetings to attend; stewardship campaigns to run; grounds to keep up; facilities to clean; windows to repair. There are phone calls to return; millions of emails to read; and volunteers to recruit. And did I mention the emails? There are budgets to oversee; funds to manage, child protection and sexual misconduct policies to write. There is consensus to build, and decision after decision to make. And I mention the emails?

There are hospital visits to make, and Sunday flowers to deliver. There are grieving people to comfort, and caring gestures to give.

And for all of us, more personally – there are relationships to repair; apologies to be made; and grudges to let go. There are sins to confess; wrongs to make right; and divisions to make whole. There are devils to resist; evil to oppose; and despair to overcome. Are you tired yet? Are you overwhelmed?

And then, there are all the prayers we need to pray. Prayers of confession and prayers of thanksgiving. Prayers for the world and prayers for one another. Prayers for ourselves and prayers for our church. Prayers for illumination and prayers for action.

There's so much to do, and so much to pray. And we have to do it in the middle of so much interference. Another notification on our smartphone. Another text message. Another app update. We're overcommitted and under-resourced. We're running everywhere – to soccer practice, music lessons, homework sessions, family obligations, doctor appointments.

Most days, there is too much to do and too much to pray amid way too much interference in our lives. And in all of this, we're supposed to follow Jesus? Really? Truth is, some days it's too much. Much too much.

We're not alone in this. For the disciples in today's Gospel text, it was much too much, as well. It was nearly time for Jesus to approach the hour of his death, his resurrection, and ascension to heaven. As they traveled the countryside, Jesus had been preparing them all along for life without him. He'd given them all the instructions they needed to go on. Time and time again, Jesus had encouraged them, and reassured them:

"Don't let your hearts be troubled, for I'm going to prepare a place for you," he'd said.

And time and time again, Jesus had told them what to do: "Believe in me, and do what I do. Keep my commandments. Be productive; bear fruit; hold out in the face of difficulty. Love me, love one another, and then go out and show that to the world. Tell the truth about me."

"However, you need to know what you've signed up for. It's **going** to be hard. You're **going** to experience pain. You see, I'm leaving....I'm leaving... to go back to my Father. You **are** going to face obstacles and trials of all sorts.

You know that feeling when there's so much to do, and your helpers have all gone home for the night? You're left by yourself, you are just overwhelmed, and don't know where to start. Even though Jesus said he'd turn it all into joy, even though he said "Take courage; I have conquered the world," I think that if I'd been one of the disciples sitting there and had just heard all that, I'd be overcome, too. So much to do: believe; love; keep the commandments; be productive; bear fruit; hold on tight, persevere. Tell God's story, speak the truth. Face the obstacles. And one more small little thing – take courage, because I have to leave you." Right. It's too much.

It may have even been too much for Jesus. Isaac Villegas writes of the desperation expressed by Jesus, saying, "With both crucifixion and ascension on the horizon, the agony of his departure gnaws at his soul; the absence from them torments his thoughts." So Jesus looks to the heavens, and begins to pray for his disciples.¹ They get to hear him pray.

Sometimes when there's too much to do, and too much to face, it's time to put it all aside – and not even to drop down on our own knees and pray ourselves; not even that, not yet anyway. Rather, it's time to simply *hear*. It's time to hear Jesus pray on **our** behalf, as he did in today's Scripture story. On that night before his death, Jesus prayed for **his** disciples, yes; but his prayer was also on behalf of all those who **will** believe in him. And that includes us – you and me!

Just knowing that ought to blow our socks off. To know that Jesus prayed for us that night, too – well, how do you even comprehend that?

In the wake of gun violence tragedies in recent months, there's been a lot of well-deserved pushback against politicians and people who offer the verbal platitude of "thoughts and prayers" for victims without meaningful action behind it. But true prayer is no clichéd expression, no excuse for inaction, but the very power of God to transform the world.

“A prayer makes sense only if it is lived,” Bishop Anthony Bloom once wrote. “Unless life and prayer become completely interwoven, prayers become a sort of polite madrigal which you offer to God” in those moments.”²

May I suggest that describes Jesus – one whose life and prayer were completely interwoven. No mere “thoughts and prayers,” but an integrated life of living what he prayed and praying what he lived.

Today, let’s put all our to-do’s aside, and *hear* his prayer for all of his disciples, then and now, them and us. Hear, and let it sink in to every cell of our being.

Hear his prayer that God would protect us as we encounter struggles and obstacles in our life of faith. Jesus asked that God would guard us from forces of evil that resist God’s purposes. He prayed that God would have our backs! Sometimes we only see in hindsight how we have been protected. But Jesus prayed for that long before we were born!

Note what Jesus didn’t pray: he didn’t pray that we’d be taken out of the world, away from all of its trials. He didn’t pray that we’d escape betrayal and hurt. Rather, he prayed for our protection in the midst of it – three times. And that’s something to hang on to.

He also prayed that we as disciples would live in unity. If we want to know how seriously Jesus took the unity of his followers, all we have to do is hear that he specifically prayed that we might be one, even as God and God’s Son are one. A prayer that he also lived. How timely is that prayer in today’s fractured world? I’ve read recent research reports that tell us that it used to be the nature of one’s religion largely drove their politics. But now it is the exact opposite: it is people’s politics that are driving their religion. Today’s Good News story calls Christ’s followers worldwide to be united as one community in Christ’s way of compassion, mercy, and love.

And he prayed for God to set us apart for the holy work of God’s holy people. That doesn’t mean we are better than anyone else in the world, nor that we’re better than anyone who believes differently than we do. It simply means we have a particular call, to live in a particular way, in our particular context – set apart to do what God calls and equips us to do.

Jesus asked God all of this: to protect us, to unify us, to serve in a world where fear and greed and pain threatens to tear us apart. Do we hear that? Do we hear Jesus’ prayer for God to empower us? Do we hear the gift Jesus asks God to give? We *need* to hear this prayer.

Many times, after we’ve prayed for someone, they’ll come back and say, “Thank you for your prayers. I could really feel them. I could really sense that you were praying for me.” Think about how powerful that is when we do the praying. Now think about Jesus praying for us.

“Prayer is love,” writes David Lose. “Taking the time to name the hopes, joys, concerns, fears, and thanksgiving of someone you know and bring all of that into the presence of God through prayer is an act of love, plain and simple. ...It expresses trust that [the one who is being prayed for is as] important to God as they are to you.”

In other words, Jesus’ prayer for his disciples then, and we who are his disciples now, is an act of his love. So if you can do just one thing this week, do this: *hear* Jesus’ prayer for you – really hear it. And let it drench the deepest, driest, thirstiest places in your life and ministry. Amen.