

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people," to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 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.

When I first met Helen, it was the middle of August, a hot day in the summer, and I had just made my first of many trips up 400 North. This particular day, I was to meet with Helen as the minister whose position I would be stepping in to. We met and talked about the ministry of congregational care at APC. Helen sat me down, and in her presence I felt **relaxed** as we talked about the intricacies of providing pastoral care for the congregation of over 900. We went over file folders of meeting minutes, policies of reception throwing, and of deacon flower distribution lists. We talked people and situations, and we talked about prayer in the life of the church. Pastoral prayer, prayers of the people, the prayer list, prayer partners, the prayer group, the prayer request box. PRAYER in the life of the church (and it led me to wonder).

So how does prayer fit into your life? Is it one item on the list of things to do? Is it something that you enjoy and relish? Has it become a routine before meals, after meetings? Is it something you mainly let others do, or something you keep personal and hold close to your heart?

The two passages for today speak to us about prayer in the life of disciples. From Acts which Ollie read, we hear about the early disciples whose first act after Jesus' ascension is to pray.

The passage from the gospel of John today also talks about prayer. It is how Jesus prays & how he prays for his disciples.

Now, there ARE several instances of Jesus praying in the Bible. He instructs the disciples with the words of the Lord's Prayer. He goes away to the hillside to pray. He breaks bread with thanksgiving to God. **He prays in the Garden while the tears drop down like blood.** We know Jesus prays, but it's not often in scripture that we hear just what Jesus has to say to God about us. In John, when Jesus prays he is the intercessor praying the Pastoral Prayers of the People¹

When Ollie or Helen or I stand behind the communion table and pray at the end of the service, we are to remind you of this moment- that on the night before he died, Jesus took a prayer, and blessed it and broke it and gave it to us.²

You see, this is the part in the gospel story where Jesus gathers his disciples to prepare them for his death. This is the night before he dies, in John there is no last supper, and Jesus washes their feet, and he begins to speak to them about taking the kingdom into the world, knowing the peace he passes to them, living the new commandment "That you love one another. Just as I have loved you" and on and on...

Jesus speaks to them in this final discourse for FOUR chapters and THEN AFTER HE HAD SPOKEN THESE WORDS, HE looked up to heaven and prayed- for them.

He looked up to heaven, and said, "Father the Hour has come. Holy Father protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one."

Rev. Lauren McFeaters says, the gift of Jesus in intercessory prayer is that we are so loved, Jesus prays for each one of us. Intercession is our Lord's priestly

¹ Mary Hinkle Shore. "Commentary in the Gospel of John 17." Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, workingpreacher.org
Lauren J. McFeaters, "Intercessor," Nassua Presbyterian Church sermon archive, www.nassauchurch.org.

way of loving us. And in turn, he hands us a priestly ministry, and calls us to prayer, as our way of loving others.

When we move to intercede to God on others behalf, we are shifting our center of gravity from our own needs to the needs of others. Prayer is making a place in your heart for that person in need, that community in trouble. With prayer, we enlarge our hearts.³ & we turn our hearts and our minds to God.

And perhaps in our day and age this is one of the biggest things we can do- give some space in our hearts for others in prayer. Because as you know and I know, our hearts, our lives, our plates are FULL. We have a lot of things going on in our lives- meeting our family's needs, making our personal goals, just getting through the day can take so much time and energy. Our hearts are so full of OUR OWN headaches, of OUR OWN issues, of OUR OWN ideas. We Hoard ourselves in our hearts.

But as priests one to another, Jesus calls us to pray, for each other. SO we know, it is a holy sacrifice, it is a spiritual discipline. It is an act of Christian discipleship to commit to turn our hearts in prayer for others, to see others' needs first.

Last week during the Prayers of the people, we as usual turned our attention to the names of the people in the bulletin who have requested prayer for the week. And at about the very time that we glanced our eyes down the list, and we went to God in prayer, one of the oldest members of our congregation John, whose name was on our list, passed away. At about the time we prayed, he moved from this life to the next, from earth to heaven, where at the right hand of God Jesus continues to pray, continues to love, continues to pull us closer to him.

When at our pastoral care visit, Ollie mentioned this occurrence to his widow and best friend of over 66 years, she said, "Oh I know you were praying for us. I felt it."

³ Larger Catechism, 7.295, Book of Confessions, Louisville, KY: Office of Presbytery General Assembly, 2004, 227.

In Jesus' intercessory prayer, he prayed, "Holy Father protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one."

When Jesus prayed for unity in the prayer at the Table in John, he didn't pray that all Christians would look the same or think the same or all be Presbyterian, he prayed that our lives together, once he was gone- as disciples as church- would reflect the unity of life Jesus shared with God and the Spirit.

In this gospel, Jesus continually points to this reality- JESUS reminds again and again that he is LORD. THAT THROUGH HIM THE PRESENCE OF GOD< THE GLORY OF GOD IS WITH THE PEOPLE. I AM, he says, I AM the BREAD OF HEAVEN, I AM the Living Water, and I AM the resurrection and the life.

And it is this very unity that Jesus holds up in prayer. That even as his flesh departs, the Spirit will come to guide them in prayer, and THEY AND WE will again know and believe and feel the power and presence of the Lord.

So how does prayer fit into your life? Richard Foster, reminds us: It's not optional. It's our priestly duty. It's a sacred responsibility; a blessed privilege for all who take up the yoke of Christ.⁴

Not too long after that day in August, I got word from Committee chair, that there were a couple changes to my contract. Oh goodness, I thought will there be more duties. When it came back, under the section labeled Pastor's duties: there was a new bullet point: The pastor will pray for the church. And a few lines down under the congregation's responsibilities: the congregation will pray for the pastor.

Helen has had the yoke of pastoral prayer for this congregation on her shoulders for years. And when she retired, she STOP preaching, and stop leading worship, and quite committee work, and take a breather from mission trips. BUT she is not retired in prayer. Your joys, your conflicts, your sicknesses, your celebrations. Her heart has stretched wide to hold you. And it is still enlarged- you are- we are all still there. Held in the heart of one who lifts hers up to the Lord and call us to do the same.

⁴ Richard J. Foster. *Prayer*. New York: Harper One, 1992, 191.