

Jesus' Prayer

The reading from John's gospel this morning is again from the farewell address which begins at Chapter 14 with Jesus washing the disciples' feet as an example of how they are to serve and are not to be served; it then continues for chapters 15 through 16 with more instructions designed to prepare them for his departure and their mission to complete his work, to give them hope for the future and a promise that they will not be left alone with this task. In many ways, John's gospel is the most theologically deep and profound gospel narrative. In many ways, especially as the narrative comes to its conclusion, it contains the most convoluted, almost cyclical language—and the reason for that is because so much of it is relational. Much of the language is about the close—intimate relationship between Jesus who stands before them and the Father who sent him. For example as the address begins, from Chapter 14: 6 when Jesus tells the disciples this often quoted statement: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He goes on to say: "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." Theologically, this makes sense to us because Jesus and the Father are one because of the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet to the disciples sitting in the room, this did not make sense as shown by Philip's response: "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." To this Jesus replies, "'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?' Do you not believe I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" At the time of this Passover meal, the disciples did not believe or understand just who Jesus was. Jesus begins to pray for his disciples after three chapters of trying to prepare them for his departure from them...on the night before the crucifixion he prays for them. In John's gospel, the divinity of Jesus is more clearly shown—and this evening prayer which is whispered into the darkness gathering around Jesus is not a prayer offered for himself; it was a prayer offered for his disciples. He offered it for this little band of beleaguered brothers with whom he's spent pretty much every hour of the last several years. They have left their homes and families, their known way of life to come with him. They have forged deep relationships not only with him but with each other. So Jesus' final prayer is that their love for each other will continue to run deep; that it will provide support for each other, that they will be, as he puts it, "one". However, the prayer that Jesus lifts is not confined to those present in that room; it isn't just for those hearing his voice and not really understanding what is about to happen. The prayer also reaches forward in time and prays for us. It names us. We are named as "those who will believe in me through their word." Jesus, as he faced the completion of his mission, lifted a prayer; the living Lord still lifts that prayer some 2000 plus years later—praying for us, each of us, prays that you and I, will also "be one," that our relationships run deep. Sometimes this passage is understood and used as a prayer for Christian unity, a prayer that there be more ecumenical agreement, between various denominations, between Protestants and Roman Catholics, etc. That is a legitimate reading for our modern context but remember the original context. In that room there were no Protestants or Catholics yet, only twelve guys from Galilee and Judea who have spent the last couple of years together on a transforming spiritual road trip. So really, basically, at its core, this isn't exactly a prayer about institutional unity...although it can be that. What it tells us is much more. It's a plea to God that those whom Jesus is about to leave, as well as those who

will come later—us—might find relationships of oneness, of love—in modern terminology—of intimacy. This section of the prayer only has seven verses, but there are certain words which are repeated over and over. These words are those associated with relationship—with intimacy. The word “love” is repeated no fewer than five times. In these same verses, Jesus speaks the word “one” four times. “Love, love, love, love, love, one, one, one.” This “prayer patter” expresses Jesus’ longing that those whom he so loves might find their way to the precious place of deep, trusting, intimate, loving human relationships. But, he also understands that such intimacy has its price. Love costs something. Jesus, the one who came and lived among us, as Emmanuel, God with us, certainly understands fully the cost of love! Although the price for God is named rather obliquely in this passage, Jesus actually names the price of this intimacy in this prayer. It’s named in a sort of coded expression as an association that we modern readers easily miss in that other key word which is repeated. That word is the mysterious little word “glory.” John’s gospel text finds that word on Jesus’ lips frequently, again and again, throughout the narrative. But “glory” within the gospel narrative doesn’t mean exactly what we usually see as its first meaning. It doesn’t actually initially mean “victory and adulation and crowns and thrones and singing angels” ...not in the beginning. Within John’s Gospel as with all of the symbols, it is a woven symbol; it’s piled with layers of meaning. When Jesus first begins to speak of his coming glory, that little word is actually the symbol for the final consummation of Jesus’ final work on earth. So, ironically, deeply so, “glory” means the cross, the scandal of death on the Roman cross. Of course, finally it means the Resurrection, but “glory” also means willing vulnerability. Glory is Jesus’ radical act of that self-giving love that prefaces Easter—that makes the Easter Resurrection possible. In short, on Jesus’ lips, “glory” means Jesus’ voluntary vulnerability and self-giving. Glory, then what is the cost of this intimacy, this oneness, that Jesus is prays for? The price, bluntly said, the cost of intimacy is nothing less than willing vulnerability. The cost of intimacy is the giving of self to others. Today we often restrict the use of the word intimacy to a very narrow range of relationships—we isolate ourselves from one another. Vulnerability and self-giving are in the starkest contrast to the current ethic of the modern culture which seems to be “quid pro quo” or “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch your back”. This probably may be efficient and necessary in the business world, but in the world of personal—in the world of human relationships—this notion of reciprocity has led to some very serious consequences. The question that then hangs over love and intimacy in a relationship then becomes this: Do people love others simply and only because they expect to get something in return? Human nature tends to be such that we naturally try to maximize our pleasure and minimize our pain—including in our relationships. The psychologists have a term for this: “enlightened self-interest”. Some people do this in direct, even base ways, going straight for whatever immediately makes them feel good or gratifies their egos right now. Some people even will see that it serves them well to enter into relationships because even then if they are loved back, that is in their self interest. That type of invitation into a relationship is not truly an invitation into the intimacy which Jesus’ is praying for those who follow him to risk. Jesus in this same farewell address has told these disciples that they should love as he has loved. Jesus teaches that love, deep intimacy, close relationships, come with a radical re-orientation. They come with voluntary vulnerability. They come through the free and joyful giving of one’s self to others. Jesus calls us to love for the sake of love, to love because God loves, even if it is not exactly in our self-interest, even if there

is no implied something to be gained down the road deal. The truth is that self-giving love brings both great joy and great anguish, great memories and sorrows. This is a truth found in every life. In loving a child there is great joy and great pain at some point---What any relationship brings, is something way beyond mere "happy". Intimacy brings us into the depths of what it is for us to be fully human. To love, to love a child, to love a parent, to love a man or a woman, even to love your neighbor, to love another as yourself, to love the one in need because your Lord asks if of you, is to be pulled beyond the cold logic of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. When you step into the danger zone of intimacy, of being in relationship with others, of belong to and in community with others, you enter a land of joy that is higher and deeper than simple pleasure and pain. The price of intimacy, the cost of love that runs deep, is nothing less than vulnerability, the free and joyful giving of self to the other. As human beings we have two commonly used hand signals. One is to hold the hand out, palm up and wiggle our fingers. Everyone recognizes that as an invitation. Come closer. The second is to hold that same hand up, but with the palm up and out with the fingers rigid. Everyone also recognizes that signal. Stop! Don't get any closer! We are like these two signals. We long for deep relationships, but at the same time we're afraid of them, afraid of what they'll cost us. Let us remember that as our Lord faced his glory, which initially meant vulnerability and a high price, he prayed that we would also be willing to risk the cost of being vulnerable so that we could love as it says in John 17: 26: "so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them." In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.