

The Lord's Long Prayer
John 17.6-23
Easter 7B
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Jesus is a paragraph away in John from the end of his time with the disciples, and he uses that time for prayer. He prays for them, he prays for us. He prays that God will continue the work that began in Jesus through everyone who follows in his way. He prays that everyone who follows will be unified and more focused on what is uniting them than what threatens to pull them apart.

In many ways, this prayer pulls together the scripture we have considered through the seven weeks of Easter—the joy, the love, the unity, the call to be a people shaped by the way of Jesus. And his words have a commissioning quality for the life and work the people are expected to carry on. This is not an “I go to prepare a place for you” speech that might tempt hearers into biding their time until a sky mansion is completed. This is Jesus handing over his work to his people.

When we get to this point in the church year, particularly on years that we focus on the story of Jesus' ascension, the lazy temptation of the church is to trust that God will reappear in the person of Jesus and fix what is broken, clean what is messy, and right what is wrong. Therefore, it's not our job to address the broken, the messy, or the wrong. Maybe that way of thinking is not pervasive in this particular congregation, but there is always a temptation to believe we cannot *really* effect change in our lifetime, we cannot *really* address poverty and racism and inequality. If we decide we cannot work to bring the kingdom of God to earth, then it follows that the work of Jesus isn't *really* our work, too. That's just too much to ask, we conclude. We focus on the sentimental idea of loving one another but abandon the command when love is too hard a way.

Yet Jesus last week and in this week's prayer asks for JOY to be in us as it is in him. In his commentary on John, Gerard Sloyan writes, The Gospel “author wants believers to live in hope until the [end of all things] but knows that the only way to make any sense out of that strange concept of the final coming is to live it now...All the way to heaven is heaven because Jesus said, ‘I am the way.’”¹

I suspect there is another reason we don't take seriously all of the ways we are called to live into our calling to be on the way of Jesus. I suspect we are afraid we will fail. In fact, we aren't just *afraid* we will fail, we *know* we will fail. We are afraid of giving our lives to something that won't bear fruit. We're afraid of publicly committing ourselves to love and then being unloving. We're afraid of marking ourselves as people united around the love of God, living in the way of Jesus, and continuing the work of the disciples because we

¹ Gerard Sloyan, *Interpretation: John*, p. 199

don't know what that looks like if the Pew Forum is telling us, "The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the share of Americans who do not identify with any organized religion is growing."²

We can dream and imagine and trust within a framework we know. Take away the framework, and we start to become rather unsteady. And friends, we know that dreaming and imagining and trusting don't happen within a known framework. Dreaming and imagining and trusting are, by their very nature, moving us toward some new thing. Jesus' prayer is asking that we will dream and imagine and trust together, with the help of God's Spirit, even when we don't know what comes next.

In her new book *Searching for Sunday*, which we are going to read in summer book groups starting in July, Rachel Held Evans shares her journey of leaving and rediscovering the church. In a section entitled "Epic Fail," she reflects on the personal experience of a church plant that never took root. The process of living and failing as church led her on a journey of reinterpreting church in the 21st century. I want to share a passage this morning that is a bit longer than what I would normally quote, but I think Evans invites us to hear Jesus' prayer with contemporary ears. Listen to her story and consider the call to imagine:

It's strange that Christians so rarely talk about failure when we claim to follow a guy whose three-year ministry was cut short by his crucifixion. Stranger still is our fascination with so-called celebrity pastors whose personhood we flatten out and consume like the faces in the tabloid aisle. But as nearly every denomination in the United States faces declining membership and waning influence, Christians may need to get use to the idea of measuring significance by something other than money, fame, and power. No one ever said the fruit of the Spirit is *relevance* or *impact* or even *revival*. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—the sort of stuff that, let's face it, doesn't always sell.

I often wonder if the role of the clergy in this age is not to dispense information or guard the prestige of their authority, but rather to *go first*, to volunteer truth about their sins, their dreams, their failures, and their fears in order to free others to do the same. Such an approach may repel the masses looking for easy answers from flawless leaders, but I think it might make more disciples of Jesus, and I think it might make healthier, happier pastors. There is a difference, after all, between preaching success and preaching resurrection. Our path is the muddier one.

It's been three years since the Mission's last Sunday and I'm still trying to figure out what went wrong...Any objective observer could have predicted our inevitable demise, and yet we barreled on, full of trust and hope and good intentions. I was as invested in a church as I'd ever been, and it failed. Epically.

² <http://www.pewforum.org>

And yet even our unsuccessful church plant managed to produce some fruit of the Spirit along the way. We baptized, broke bread, preached the Word, and confessed our sins. We created a sanctuary where people told the truth without fear. We fed the hungry and [cared for] the sick. We worked through our differences with care and grace. And we learned, perhaps the hard way, that church isn't static. It's not a building, or a denomination, or a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Church is a moment in time when the kingdom of God draws near, when a meal, a story, a song, an apology, and even a failure is made holy by the presence of Jesus among us and within us.

Church was alive and well long before we came up with the words *relevant* and *missional*, and church will go on long after the grass grows through our cathedral floors. The holy Trinity doesn't need our permission to carry on in their endlessly resourceful work of making all things new. That we are invited to catch even a glimpse of the splendor is grace. All of it, every breath and second, is grace.³

We are invited into a story of grace. We are called and welcomed into God's story. In Jesus' prayer, we hear the order of that calling: God has sent Jesus who is sending the Holy Spirit who will send the disciples who will send us. This prayer is pointing back to the first relationship and then pointing forward all the way to us today as Jesus prays for all of us who are to follow.

In our hopes and in our fears, what prayers would you ask Jesus to whisper over this place? How would you want him to imagine and hope and dream for you? How would you ask him to cover you with his words? Write it down on the "notes" section of your bulletin insert. Carry it with you. Leave it tucked into the John 17 page of your bible. Make a note that this long prayer in John 17 includes you as Jesus looked far past a moment to the future of a movement.

As I have considered this long Lord's prayer, I have reflected on what I pray for you:

God, may they believe.

There is so much in this world that gives us the right to hang up the towel and call it a day and say we tried. They could be at brunch right now. Some of them almost didn't come but showed up anyway, last minute, habit, nagging sense of duty, curiosity, a pull on their spirit. But they're here.

May they sense that you are, too.

That closeness, that warmth, that stillness and sensation when everything just hovers and pauses for a long second. May they know that you are in this place.

God, may they search for you and find you.

That stillness and closeness isn't limited to this place; it permeates life. May they remember you are way, truth, and LIFE. May they look for you in the midst of it all. Your

³ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, pp. 112-113

way is to be lived, O God. Remind them. At the dry cleaners and in the garden, in traffic and in the office, catching a sunset over the river and hearing a trumpet play somewhere off in the distance. May they know you are near and calling them to life.

God, may they live into the way of Jesus. There are so many ways enticing us, offering us promises and certainty, waving their banners for us to join. When the way of the country club or the political action committee is clamoring for their attention, may they tune out those siren songs and search again for you. The Way of Jesus is gracious, messy, inclusive, celebratory, rowdy, and unexpected. May they follow even though they do not know what happens beyond the next step. May they be glad and confident knowing they are in a long line of called ones and blessed ones and servant ones and seeking ones.

God, may they find each other along your way. Somewhere years ago, decades ago, a pastor or evangelist or Sunday School teacher asked, "Do you know that you know that you know you are on the list to spend eternity in heaven?" And fear grew up as individuals lined up to get their tickets punched or check in with the Maitre'D and get their names on the list. The pastor or evangelist or Sunday School teacher did not tell them "All the way to heaven is heaven" or that the way was being lived out together, as a people, in ordinary and extraordinary ways. So this is a new way of understanding Jesus and understanding You for many of us. Remind them, O God, they don't have to go it alone. We are not alone.

God, may they dream and imagine and hope. Failure and fear are shape-shifters. What looks like caution and pragmatism can really be terror that something we love will slip away. Take away their fear, O God, and replace it with the joy Jesus described. This is a time to take risks and welcome new possibilities. May they be dialed into your Spirit and the Holy Imagination. May the ideas and actions of this community be synced to your mysterious and loving ways. Remind us all, O God, that "All of it, every breath and second, is grace."

God, may the neighborhood and city around this place know who they are because of the ways they love each other, love their neighbors, and love you. May the way of love be abundant here. May we value stories above numbers. May we value grace above judgment. May we value welcome above restrictions. May we practice a peace and kindness and gentleness with each other that we so desperately long for ourselves. May we be people who live generously and laugh heartily and bless lavishly. May we delight in you and delight in each other. And one of these days, when the grass grows through the floors and our names are etched in stone, may the story be told by our children and our children's children and our children's children's children that the legacy of God's love lives on in this old world because of the saints who lived and worshiped and followed Jesus right here.

Amen and amen and amen.