

A Prayer Goodbye  
John 17.6-19  
May 13, 2018  
Ascension Sunday  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Loyola graduates lined up late Friday afternoon to enter Holy Name of Jesus Church. I drove past the line with my son sitting beside me, now just six years from heading off to college. I thought of my own university graduation goodbyes some two decades ago, though it feels like months. The celebration, the passage of time, the new beginnings, the farewells. Alicia Melendez, from our choir, graduated yesterday. This is a tricky time of year for tender hearts like me as ones we love and share life with for a season move on from this place.

Many of us made a point to attend the New Orleans Volunteer Orchestra/Voices of New Orleans performance on Thursday night as it was Joseph Cieslak's final night conducting, creating, and leading this beautiful group of almost 100 volunteers. Saying goodbye to Joseph this month is tender for me and for all who love him, so here we go again with the lump-in-the-throat farewells to another beautiful one who made a home in our hearts and this city but now moves on.

The VONO choir clearly had the same thing in mind. After Thursday night's performance, I stood with Joseph hugging him and wishing him well when the choir unexpectedly began to sing the great Irish blessing, "May the road rise to meet you/ May the wind be at your back/May the sun shine warmly on your face/May the rain fall soft upon your fields/And until we meet again/May God hold you in the palm of his hands." Well, good grief. I can't take that kind of lovely surprise, so as Joseph walked off to sit and receive this blessing from his choir, I just stood there alone crying. Just boo-hooing for what must be the 10th time in the past two weeks. What a thing to love so well that we weep our way to goodbye even as we celebrate a beautiful friend's great success!

I think this is exactly where we find Jesus today in John's gospel. Some scholars refer to this passage as Jesus' Priestly Prayer. I find that so cold and distant. This is a personal, intimate prayer goodbye. He knows it's time for him to go. He knows he has taught the disciples all he can with the time he had. And now he's releasing them into the fullness of their ability to live out the Jesus Way with the presence of the Holy Spirit and the

mysterious love of God. Jesus is calling on God to draw near just as he knows he will slip away from their presence soon.

We are overhearing Jesus pray for his disciples; praying for his friends before he leaves. Keep the context in John's gospel in mind, too. This prayer is situated in the chapters around the upper room, the last supper, Jesus washing the disciples feet, and the command to love. It's fascinating to me that so much of the Jesus story I inherited as a young person was tethered to the cross. And yet the entire season of Easter brings us back again and again not to the suffering of crucifixion but to the way of Jesus' love and the mysterious, irrational truth that he expected his closest friends to love even better. In this very same storyline, he says to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these" (John 14.12).

Karoline Lewis observes, "It's easy to lift Jesus' prayer out of its context, easy to compare it to the other gospels, or to generalize it in such a way that waters down the weight of its impact or reduces it to wise words on petitions or instructions on prayer. This is not the Lord's Prayer. This is not Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray. This is not only a personal prayer or privatized piety. After betrayal and predicted denial, after concerned questions and foretold rejection, the disciples do not need another lesson, another miracle, another example. They need exactly what Jesus does, because Jesus knows -- for Jesus to pray for them."<sup>1</sup>

Professor Mark Vitalis Hoffman adds, "It is a passage that functions better as a meditative prayer than as a spoken text. It is like a fabric woven with repeating words and themes."<sup>2</sup>

In a time of crisis, transition, grief, confusion, and fear, Jesus lovingly touches and washes the feet of the people he loves. He nourishes them with bread and wine. He looks them in the eye and tells them he believes in their goodness, their capacity to love, and he assures them they are capable of far more than they can imagine. And then he prays for them, asking God's presence and power to rest on them and be real to them. Even if they don't quite believe. Even though they definitely don't understand what's happening. He prays his love right into them through the hidden work of holy words—something like God naming and speaking an entire world into existence.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5147>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3661](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3661)

Do you have a friend who does this for you? You're at a crossroads. Walking away from a marriage, heading toward a new life path, releasing one you loved at the grave, learning to live with chronic illness, accepting a new job, juggling more than you think is possible. Whatever is happening in life, have you had a friend show up fully to care for you, feed you, sit beside you, speak lovingly, assure you of your capacity to keep moving forward, and then pray for you, lending you their strength and maybe even some joy while yours is low?

What's happening here in this prayer is what happens when love fully shows up in our lives. We can try to dissect it academically and talk about the phrases and metaphors. We can pick up on the recurring themes of Word and Truth. We can point to the Greek *hagiozo*, translated *hallowed*, and make the connection between "Hallowed be thy name" and the word *sanctify* in verse 17—Jesus calling these friends sacred and holy and special in the same way he speaks of God. We can make these connections with our minds and nod together in agreement, "Oh, that's fascinating. Yes, interesting point." But what is happening here has to be experienced in the soul, in the bones, in the part of our beings that gasps when we encounter something truer and deeper than we ever dared allow ourselves to believe was possible; more beautiful than anything we believed we were worthy to receive.

Jesus is seeing them right where they are, blessing them as they are in this very moment, and praying over them for grace and peace to be theirs. This is the kind of community we are creating right here. A community of seeing and knowing and loving in ways that transform us all.

I know you carry so much. I know today is hard for a lot of people in this room who have lost their mothers. Or never had mothers who were around for all number of reasons. For mothers who lost children at any age. For those who grieve sick children they cannot heal. For those who desperately wanted to be mothers but lost babies rather than birthed them. Or lost that dream altogether and hold grief and tenderness around this day. Carrying pain is hard. Carrying grief is so difficult. I know you carry so much. And you are doing it so well. Even on the days when you fall apart. You are doing it! You are showing up again and again. I see you in your pain. Know how loved you are. Know you are seen and held.

I know you carry fear. Fear of making rent and affording life. Fear of what you cannot control. Fear of the unknown. Fear of making a wrong choice and an irreversible decision. Fear the ones you love will suffer. Fear the world is falling apart—run by madmen, heating up like simmering water on a stove, the poor growing poorer and more numerous while the rich grow richer and fewer. Take your pick. I know that anxiety

is represented here in this space. I see it in your eyes. I hear it in the space between your words when you sigh. Release that fear now as you release this next breath. You are not alone. We will carry this together. Remember: the story of the Jesus we follow is the Immanuel story—God with us. You are not alone. We are not alone.

Friends, Jesus was building a movement. He was talking and living and modeling a way of being in the world that transforms all people and all components of creation by leaning into a fierce love. You can't think your way through that. You have to live it and feel it. Feel the seen-ness that happens in true community. Feel the sacred space of holy welcome without judgment. Feel the mysterious, healing, all-encompassing love of God that washes over you in your grief and fear and pain and suffering and loneliness. This part of the Jesus way must be experienced rather than articulated. And when you have felt this kind of love in sacred space, then you join the movement that Valerie Kuhr calls Revolutionary Love.

And it's from this deep well of love that Jesus prayed for his friends like this.

O God,

Before there was anything  
while there was only void and nothingness  
you existed as presence and love

I have told these friends about you  
these men and women you gave me  
the ones who are yours from the beginning of time  
and pure gift in my life

They know who you are and ache to believe  
Deep in their bones they know your peace and grace  
your lovingkindness your imagination  
They know and reach and are convinced you are  
just as I have shown them you are

I love them. And I pray for them.  
I'm not praying for what's broken and untamed in this world  
but for what is so very good and right in them.

May they know what is so very good in them  
May they know what is so very right.

May they feel their light and beauty and goodness  
Because when they do, then they can carry out that  
light and beauty and goodness into the dark and crooked places.

Wash over them with holy blessing  
Restoring that image you first breathed into them  
Making them truth-bearers in the world  
Set apart for revolutionary love  
Carrying this Way into every place because this Way is who they are.

Protect them and heal them  
Be near them and guide them  
Bless them and draw them into your heart

For you, O God, are the Source and Guide,  
the completion of Love  
And we find our home in you

Amen.