“Jesus prays for you”

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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*John 17:6-19*

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One of the funniest moments replayed over and over in churches all across the world is the moment the pastor or the committee chair asks church members, “So, who would like to pray?” You’d think you had just asked them to wrestle a pig or something. Eyes immediately dart to the floor. Bodies tremble. The room goes silent, and awkward. Ironically, there are probably a few people praying that they won’t be asked to pray. I kid, but also, I get it. Public prayer is intimidating. It’s even harder because a lot of us aren’t even so confident in our personal prayer life. We don’t know what to say. We forget to do it. We feel disappointed when prayer doesn’t produce those sweeping feelings of ecstasy. We might not even be sure we believe in this whole prayer thing. Besides, isn’t that what we hired the pastor for? To pray for us? (*Get to work, you lazy pastor!*)

Today, in the Gospel of John, Jesus prays. He prays for the disciples who have walked and ministered with him for three years. He prays for these fishermen, and tax collectors, and day laborers, whom he has come to love. They sit with him now at the Last Supper. He can see that they are afraid, confused. They’ve given up everything to follow him, and now he tells them that he’s leaving.

He has tried teaching them. He has commanded them to love each other as he has loved them. He has asked them not to let their hearts be troubled but to believe in God, as they believe in him. He has told them to stand strong in the face of suffering and persecution. He has shown them the way to God. He has taught them how to pray.

He knows, though, that for all his teaching, it is not enough. They will hide. They will doubt. They will deny him. They will squabble. They will lose their way.

They will be sitting in a meeting, and when their pastor asks them to pray, they will stare at their shoes like they are the most fascinating thing they’ve ever seen.

It’s why Jesus came in the first place. It’s why he’s about to lay down his life for them. Because they can’t do it on their own. And so Jesus prays for them. Not in private. But right there in front of them, so that they know that he’s praying for them. And he’ll keep on praying for them, no matter how many times they mess up, no matter how many times they hurt him, no matter how many times they hurt each other.

Jesus looks at these men and women and says to God that they are his, and he is theirs. He loves them—loves them despite everything he knows—and he asks God to love them too. He asks God to protect them, to be with them when they are lonely, to guide them when they are uncertain, to strengthen them when they are afraid.

When I read Jesus’ prayer, I can feel his fervency, how he must have trembled, and maybe even cried. I think of all the people who’ve prayed for me over the years. I think of our own prayer chain in this church, and how when someone’s in the hospital, or has experienced a death, or is just having a hard time, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of knees bent at bedsides, lifting them in prayer. I think of the scene in the movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, where Mr. Rogers (played by the great Tom Hanks) prays for hundreds of people, every day, speaking each of them by name.

And I wonder what it would be like to be one of those disciples in that room and to see Jesus pray for you in that way. To pray with everything he’s got. And I think to myself: maybe we are one of those disciples. Maybe Jesus is praying for us. Right now.

Yes, it is important that we pray. But if prayer is just something *we* do, then it will never be enough. We’ll never be enough. There needs to be someone on the other end of this phone call, someone praying for us.

So, here’s the good news, my friends: Before we pray, before we ever try, Jesus prays for us. Before we ever lift a thought, or a hand, or a word, Jesus reaches out to us.

He prays for us, despite everything he knows about us. He prays that love would enter us, surround us, and show us the truth: that, in Jesus Christ, God is not far; God is here; God is one with us.

He prays for us when we are hurting. He sends us his courage when we are afraid, his wisdom when we are foolish, his joy when we are sad, his life when we are dying. He places his prayer on our lips, making our words his, our love his, so that when we do finally reach out in prayer, we do so with him at our side.

He prays for us in the dark. He prays for us in the hospital. He prays for us in the soup kitchen. He prays for us on the street. He prays for us in our bedroom, in our basement, in our living room. He prays for us right now, sitting beside us, his hands on our shoulders.

Of course, it’s easy enough to understand how Jesus, the man, prayed for his disciples, right there around that table in the 1st century CE. It’s harder to fathom how Jesus, who is one with God in all mystery and eternity, prays for us now. All language, all metaphor, all analogy, fail, for we cannot begin to comprehend the mysteries of the divine. All we know is that Jesus loves us, and he extends that love to us even now, in what today we are calling “prayer.” If our prayer is an extension of ourselves into God and neighbor, then Jesus’ prayer is an extension of God into us.

Jesus’ prayer means we do not walk alone. It means God is with us. It means we have on our side something that can move mountains and uproot injustice and wipe away tears and unveil the beauty of the world, something more powerful than death, more powerful than sin: we have love. God’s love.

And we have it, because, every second of the day, in every parcel of the universe, for every age to come, Jesus prays for us.

His prayer is the wrecking ball of every wall between us and God, between us and salvation.

So today, somewhere on your bulletin, or on a scrap of paper, I want you to write what you need Jesus to pray for. I invite you to carry this piece of paper with you, in your pocket or your purse or briefcase, and pull it out from time to time this week as a reminder that Jesus cares about you and is praying for you. May it be a reminder of the power, and the love, that surround you. **Amen.**