

John 17: 6-19

I OFTEN PICK MY GRANDSON UP AFTER SCHOOL AND RECENTLY UPON GETTING IN MY CAR HE SAID, "CAN WE GO TO WENDY'S FOR AN AFTER SCHOOL SNACK? I'M ASKING FOR A FRIEND." "WHAT FRIEND?" I ASKED. "ARE YOU MEETING A FRIEND AT WENDY'S?" TO WHICH HE LAUGHED, EXPLAINING THAT 'ASKING FOR A FRIEND' WAS MEANT AS A JOKE USED WHEN WANTING TO ASK A QUESTION YOURSELF BY PUTTING A LITTLE HUMOR IN IT.

ON THIS SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER, OUR GOSPEL READING INCLUDES THOSE THREE WORDS..I AM ASKING. THIS IS JESUS'S HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER WHICH IS THE CULMINATION OF HIS FAREWELL DISCOURSE TO HIS DISCIPLES. THE SETTING IS THE UPPER ROOM ON MAUNDY THURSDAY. JESUS HAS JUST WASHED HIS DISCIPLE'S FEET, FORESEEN JUDAS'S BETRAYAL, PREDICTED PETER'S DENIAL, PROMISED HIS DISCIPLES THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND TAUGHT THEM TIME IS RUNNING OUT. WHICH IT IS.

BEFORE THE FINAL MOMENTS BEFORE HIS ARREST, JESUS "LOOKS TOWARD HEAVEN AND PRAYS." I'VE HEARD SOME PEOPLE CALL THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER THE *OTHER LORD'S* PRAYER---ONE WE DON'T MEMORIZE AND RECITE ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. IT'S CERTAINLY NOT POLISHED AND POETIC LIKE THE "OUR FATHER." IT DOESN'T FLOW; IT'S LONG, RAMBLING, AND RATHER HARD TO FOLLOW. AND THOUGH THE DISCIPLES ARE MEANT TO OVERHEAR THE WORDS, JESUS'S TONE HAS AN URGENCY AND PASSION TO IT THAT IS ACHINGLY PRIVATE. JESUS ISN'T ENGAGING IN A TEACHING MOMENT WITH THIS PRAYER; HE'S OPENING HIS HEART.

I AM ASKING HAS A HEARTBREAKING VULNERABILITY ABOUT IT. JESUS SPENDS HIS FINAL MOMENTS WITH HIS FRIENDS IN HUMBLE SUPPLICATION. JESUS ENDS HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY *ASKING* SOMETHING FROM GOD.

IN AN OUTPOURING OF WORDS AND EMOTIONS, JESUS ASKS GOD TO DO FOR HIS FRIENDS WHAT HE HIMSELF CAN NO LONGER DO. TO BE FOR THEM IN SPIRIT WHAT HE CAN NO LONGER BE FOR THEM IN BODY. "PROTECT THEM," JESUS PRAYS. "PROTECT THEM BY YOUR NAME." "PROTECT THEM FROM THE EVIL ONE." PROTECT THEM SO THAT THEY CAN KNOW UNITY, JOY, AND TRUTH. PROTECT THEM."

THE VULNERABILITY AND HONESTLY OF THIS PRAYER ALMOST BRINGS TEARS TO MY EYES. DO WE KNOW THIS JESUS WHO PLEADS SO EARNESTLY? WE KNOW THE JESUS WHO TEACHES, HEALS, RESURRECTS, AND FEEDS. BUT DO WE KNOW THIS ONE? IN THIS PASSAGE JESUS DOES THE SINGLE HARDEST THING A FRIEND, A SPOUSE, A PARENT, A CHILD, A TEACHER, A PASTOR EVER DOES. SENDS HIS CHERISHED ONES OUT INTO THE TREACHEROUS WORLD ON NOTHING BUT A HOPE AND A PRAYER. I THINK OF THE PARENTS WHO WATCH THEIR CHILDREN GO OFF TO FIGHT WARS. I AM REMINDED OF SPOUSES WHO WATCH THEIR

HUSBANDS OR WIVES PUT ON THE UNIFORM OF POLICE OFFICER, FIREFIGHTER, OR EMT, KNOWING THEIR LIVES MAY BE ON THE LINE AT ANY MOMENT OF ANY DAY. AND I THINK OF FAMILIES WHOSE LOVED ONES ARE LIVING WITH SUBSTANCE ABUSE DISORDERS AND WHO FEAR THERE WILL BE AN OVERDOSE THAT WILL PROVE FATAL.

LIFE IS BOTH BEAUTIFUL AND DANGEROUS ISN'T IT? THERE ARE NO GUARANTEES OF ANOTHER DAY OR EVEN ANOTHER BREATH. AS CLICHÉ AS THE SAYING "LIFE IS FRAGILE; HANDLE WITH PRAYER" MAY BE, IT MAKES AN IMPORTANT POINT. PRAYER FORMS THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH. IT'S WHERE WE MEET GOD IN A VERY REAL AND TANGIBLE WAY. SURE, WE MAY WONDER WHETHER IT'S MAKING A DIFFERENCE, BUT OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST MODELS THAT PRAYER DOES MATTER, AND THAT WE ARE CALLED TO FOLLOW HIS EXAMPLE.

I AM ASKING. AS IF TO SAY: I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU WILL DO WITH MY ASKING. I DON'T KNOW HOW OR WHEN OR IF YOU WILL ANSWER THIS PRAYER. I CAN'T FORCE YOUR HAND. BUT I AM STAKING MY LIFE AND THE LIVES OF MY LOVED ONES ON YOUR GOODNESS, BECAUSE THERE'S LITERALLY NOTHING MORE I CAN DO ON MY OWN. I HAVE COME TO THE END OF WHAT THIS ACHING LOVE OF MINE CAN HOLD AND GUARD AND SAVE. I AM ASKING. HAVE YOU EVER BEEN THERE? I AM ASKING, PLEADING, OH GOD.

THIS PASSAGE INVITES US TO WONDER WHAT ROLE PRAYER PLAYS IN OUR WORLD, A WORLD FULL OF TRAGEDY, INJUSTICE, AND OPPRESSION. DOES GOD INTERVENE DIRECTLY IN HUMAN AFFAIRS? DOES HIS INTERVENTION---OR LACK OF IT---DEPEND ON OUR WAY OF ASKING? DO OUR PRAYERS CHANGE GOD'S MIND?

A COMMENTATOR WRITES: AS HAS BEEN THE CASE IN MANY AREAS OF MY FAITH LIFE, MY BELIEFS ABOUT PRAYER HAVE CHANGED A LOT OVER THE YEARS. AS A CHILD, I BELIEVED WITH ALL MY HEART THAT PRAYER HEALED EVERY DISEASE, PREVENTED CAR ACCIDENTS, FED HUNGRY CHILDREN IN FARAWAY COUNTRIES, FENDED OFF NIGHTMARES, PREVENTED PREMATURE DEATH, AND ALWAYS STOPPED THE BAD GUYS. AS A TEEN AND YOUNG ADULT, MUCH OF THAT CERTAINTY COLLAPSED UNDER THE WEIGHT OF LIFE EXPERIENCE---SOME DISEASES DIDN'T GET BETTER, CAR ACCIDENTS HAPPENED, I HAD NIGHTMARES, BABIES STARVED IN FARAWAY COUNTRIES, YOUNG PEOPLE DIED, AND BAD GUYS OFTEN WON THE DAY. WHEN I ASKED THE ELDERS IN MY CHURCH TO EXPLAIN THESE DISCREPANCIES, THEY GAVE ME TWO ANSWERS: 1) YOU NEED TO PRAY WITH MORE FAITH, AND 2) SOMETIMES GOD'S ANSWER IS NO.

TODAY, SHE CONTINUES, I LIVE IN A COMPLICATED ADULT WORLD. I HAVE FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS WHO PRAY FOR PARKING SPOTS, LOST KEYS, LITTLE LEAGUE VICTORIES AND IVY LEAGUE ADMISSIONS FOR THEIR CHILDREN. BUT I ALSO HAVE FRIENDS WHO AVOID

PRAYER ON PRINCIPLE, CONVINCED THAT THE TRUE PURPOSE OF PRAYER HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH ASKING GOD “FOR STUFF.” IN THEIR WORDS: “HE’S GOD. NOT SANTA CLAUSE.”

SO WHY DO WE PRAY? ONE ANSWER IS THAT WE PRAY BECAUSE WE’RE COMPELLED TO DO SO. BECAUSE SOMETHING IN US CRIES OUT FOR ENGAGEMENT, RELATIONSHIP, ATTENTIVENESS, AND WORSHIP. WE PRAY BECAUSE OUR SOUL YEARS FOR CONNECTION WITH GOD, WITH JESUS, AND THAT CONNECTION IS BEST ESTABLISHED IN PRAYER. WITH WORDS, WITHOUT WORDS, THROUGH LAUGHTER, THROUGH TEARS, IN HOPE, AND IN DESPAIR, PRAYER HOLDS OPEN THE REALIZATION THAT WE’RE NOT ALONE, AND THIS BROKEN, ACHING, WORLD ISN’T ALONE, EITHER. C.S. LEWIS WROTE: “I PRAY BECAUSE I CAN’T HELP MYSELF. BECAUSE THE NEED FLOWS OUT OF ME ALL THE TIME—WAKING AND SLEEPING.”

THOSE ARE REASONABLE ANSWERS. BUT MAYBE TODAY’S GOSPEL READING OFFERS US ANOTHER ONE: WE PRAY BECAUSE JESUS DID. WE ASK BECAUSE JESUS ASKED. ASKING IS THE LAST THING JESUS DID BEFORE HIS ARREST. THE LAST TENDER MEMORY HE GAVE HIS FRIENDS. HE DIDN’T AWE THEM WITH A GRAND FINALE OF MIRACLES. HE DIDN’T CONTEMPLATE THEIR FUTURES AND DESPAIR. HE LOOKED UP TO HEAVEN WITH A TREMBLING HEART, AND SURRENDERED HIS CHERISHED ONES TO GOD. JESUS PRAYED THAT WE MIGHT BELIEVE. IN A WORLD OF PERPLEXITY, COMPLEXITY, AND CONFUSION, JESUS KNEW WE NEEDED GUIDANCE. WE NEED GUIDANCE. QUESTIONS BOMBARD US: WHAT SHOULD I DO? WHAT DECISION SHOULD I MAKE? AM I DOING THE RIGHT THING?

PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR GUIDANCE IN MANY PLACES. IF YOU DON’T BELIEVE ME, CHECK OUT THE SELF-HELP SECTION AT ANY BOOKSTORE OR ONLINE. THERE ARE HOW-TO-BOOKS FOR EVERY SUBJECT, FROM GETTING BETTER AT BREAD BAKING, TO DEVELOPING FAITH, ROMANCE TO EVERY DIET EVER CREATED, FROM EXERCISE OF ALL SHAPTES AND FORMS TO CREATING A NEW YOU!!! WE LEARN HOW TO DRESS FOR SUCCESS, INFLUENCE OTHER PEOPLE, AND EVEN HOW TO BECOME WEALTHY. YET JOHN SHARES WITH US THE ULTIMATE CONCERN OF A SAVIOR WHO PRAYS THAT WE MIGHT BELIEVE THAT GOD LOVES US AND IS SEEKING A RELATIONSHIP WITH US. THE BELIEF THAT JESUS SEEKS IN US IS NOT A SELF-CENTERED TRUST OF OUR OWN KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS BUT A TRUE UNDERSTANDING OF THE FATHER’S LOVE FOR US, THAT WE MAY COME TO BELIEVE THAT JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD, AND THROUGH BELIEVING WE MAY LIVE IN HIS NAME.

JESUS PRAYED. JESUS ASKED BECAUSE HE LOVED. JESUS PRAYED AND SO SHOULD WE. JESUS LOVED AND SO DO WE. IF YOU WERE TO PRAY, ‘HEAVENLY FATHER, I’M ASKING.....’ WHAT WOULD YOUR PRAYER ENTAIL? WHOM WOULD YOU PRAY FOR? LET US PRAY:

HEAVENLY FATHER, I’M ASKING.....

