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*Seventh Sunday of Easter*

*May 29, 2022*

*Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Rev. 22;12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26*

I'm going to assume that more prayers have been raised this week than have been raised in a long time. After tragic mass shootings, people often say the victims and their loved ones are in their thoughts and prayers. And if people truly do live up to what they say, there must have been countless prayers lifted this week to God.

Today in the gospel Jesus is praying. This is the end of what's called Jesus' high priestly prayer in which he prays for himself, for the disciples, and for us—for those, he says, who *will* believe in me. In the Gospel of John there is no Lord's Prayer and no prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, so this *is* Jesus' main and final prayer. What Jesus is asking God for in this prayer is the unity of his followers—"that they may be one, Jesus says, as you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...that they may become *completely* one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

That they may be one as we are one. Well, it sure doesn't seem like Jesus' prayer has come to pass, does it? We aren't really one, are we? We saw it this week after the tragedy in Ulvade. Undoubtedly, we were all one in mind that this kind of horrific trauma should never have happened, but what to do so it never happens again? We certainly aren't of one mind in our country, perhaps not even in our church.

And if Jesus prayed this prayer 2,000 years ago and never has there truly been unity in human history, what is the difference that Jesus' prayer makes? It might even beg the question, what is the difference that our own prayers make?

I have to admit that even as a pastor, there have been times I have questioned what good my prayers do. There is a member of our congregation who always says to me that my prayers mean more to God because I am a pastor, even though I assure them that's not the case. But sometimes even my prayers and the fervent prayers of many faithful don't come to pass. It can make you wonder if God really hears us, and what good our prayers are doing.

And yet, Jesus tells us to pray, and even shows us how. So perhaps today we need to reflect a little more deeply on what prayer is, and what prayer isn't. About what prayer does to us and for us and for those for whom we pray, and what it means when we pray for things that we aren't sure will really come to pass.

So let's look again at Jesus' prayer here in the Gospel of John. The context of Jesus' prayer is the night before he dies. One of his disciples has already betrayed him, and one of them is about to deny him. He is on the cusp of being crucified by the Romans. Clearly there is no unity here and yet Jesus prays for unity, all the while knowing he will be betrayed, denied, and crucified.

What Jesus shows us is that prayer is trusting that what is, is not what has to be. It is about believing that the worst thing that can happen is never the last thing that can happen. It is about imagining and naming the kind of life and world God wants for us. It's about having the courage to not give up, and, even knowing what might happen, still having hope.

It reminds me of when Martin Luther was asked what he would do if the world would end tomorrow, he answered, "I would still plant a tree today."

What Jesus teaches us in this gospel passage is that prayer gets us outside ourselves and our own limitations. In the Gospel of John, Jesus doesn't pray that this cup passes from him. He doesn't pray for himself; he prays for his best friends. He even prays for the one who

has betrayed him and the one he knows will deny him. When Jesus prayed for others, he removed the focus from himself to God, and to those for whom he prayed.

When we pray for others, prayer also removes the focus from ourselves and connects us to God and to the person or people for whom we pray. Prayer summons the Holy Spirit to be abundantly present in the space between us and God and between us and those for whom we pray. Honestly, it matters less *what* we pray than *that* we pray.

When you prayed this week for the loved ones of those 19 children and 2 teachers who died in Uvalde, you were summoning the Holy Spirit. You were connecting with God and with those for whom the worst thing possible had happened. Your prayer was a *protest* against the worst thing, trusting that it was not the last thing for those families. It didn't matter the exact words you used, or the length of your prayer, but your prayer did matter. Prayer brought you close to God and God close to them. And it brought you closer to them, and isn't that unity? Isn't that what Jesus himself prayed for?

I do want to remind us what prayer isn't. God is not a genie in a bottle granting us wishes—prayer is not giving our laundry list of what we want to God and then sitting back and waiting for God to make it happen.

When we pray for something, we are not passive. Because what prayer does is help us work toward that for which we are praying. When we pray to God to ask for something, we are letting God know that we are willing to work toward it ourselves. When we pray for an end to school shootings, it motivates us to join or support an organization working toward gun violence prevention or increased mental health resources. When we pray for our enemies, we are telling God we are willing to extend love and forgiveness. When we pray for the health of someone we love, we are promising God we are willing to support their physical needs, too. When we pray for peace

in the world, we are covenanting with God that our own actions will be peaceful, and we will be a model of peacemaking for others.

Prayer isn't primarily about changing God's mind. God has already promised to be with us and those whom we love. What prayer does is change us—to be more trusting of God, and to be more like God.

And when we pray for things that don't come to pass, it doesn't mean God has abandoned us or others. Our prayers, even when not answered how we ask, remind us that God is God, and we are not. Even our prayers that don't come to pass have the power to increase our trust in God because it means we are calling upon and relying not on ourselves, but on the God who created us, redeemed us, and promises to walk with us.

Finally, we must recall what Jesus truly was praying for us. Jesus didn't pray for a unity of mind, but a unity of love. That the love with which God has loved Jesus may also be in us. Jesus prayed that we might love one another. Unity is not about thinking the same thing or doing the same thing, but it is about loving the same way Jesus did.

Prayer works, perhaps not always in the ways we might assume, but God does hear us, God does draw close to us, and God does expect of us partnership toward the things for which we are praying.

I'll end today with the Prayer of St. Francis, a prayer you might know:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.*

*O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*