

## WHEN JESUS PRAYS FOR US (John 17:1-11)

How often do we get to listen in to someone else's prayer? Not very, which is probably a good thing because at best that's kind of like eavesdropping, if not downright voyeuristic. On second thought, though, it might be enlightening to find out what some people ask God for when they assume no one else is listening in. I can imagine some politicians praying for an epidemic of voter amnesia so they forget half the things they've ever said – the half that contradicts whatever it was they just got through saying.

Listening in is exactly what Jesus' friends get to do in today's lesson: listen in on Jesus' prayer. And I wonder if they were surprised to hear him praying for them? Knowing what's in store, it would be natural for him to pray for himself. But instead his concern is for those he's leaving behind and how they will fare when he's gone.

Whether they find this prayer surprising or not, I do. To say Jesus' disciples were generally clueless is being kind. They often come across as a bunch of inept bumbler who never quite seem to get what he was up to. So if Jesus is going to pray for them, he might have asked God to open their eyes and clear their minds and help them get it. There's nothing like that in his prayer, though. Instead, he has nothing but good things to say about the disciples: that God gave them to him, that they kept the word they were taught, even that they understand Jesus was on a mission from God.

I suppose it's possible that Jesus said these flattering things because he knew his friends were listening in and he wanted to give them a little shot in the arm. Goodness knows they needed it. But they were going to need more than a little ego boost to make it on their own.

Looking back from where we stand, there's a kind of inevitability about the church – as if it were bound to grow and spread and become a force in the world. And maybe it was – preordained, as it were. But nobody in the first century knew that. Nobody could possibly have predicted what the future held for the church, or if it even had a future. From that perspective, there was nothing inevitable about it at all. A little divine intercession sure couldn't hurt, though, so Jesus prays for his disciples.

But this isn't merely a prayer for the little group gathered around a table in an upper room. It isn't merely a prayer for the nascent church. It's a prayer for the church as it would become. In other words, it's a prayer for us, as well. And goodness knows, we need Jesus' intercession every bit as much as his first disciples needed it.

Jesus' prayer raises some big questions. What does it mean to be a Christian in the world? How should we live the Christian life? *Can* we lead the Christian life?

The Christian life looks very different today from what it looked like 2000 years ago. For the first 300 years, the Christian life was one of facing hostility

and dealing with opposition and enduring persecution. The Christian life meant putting your life on the line, literally.

How much courage does it take to be a Christian in 2011? Seriously. When was the last time you feared that you might be persecuted if you did the Christian thing? Or if you simply went to church?

James Crawford, who used to be minister at Old South Church in Boston, once said, "In this country we Christian types are, by and large, patsies. We tip our hats to Herod...We are just like anybody else. We want discipleship. But that trip to Jerusalem – thanks, but no thanks! (*Worthy to Raise Issues*, p. 33).

Jesus and his followers knew the world was a dangerous, hostile place. Jesus said that he had glorified God by finishing the work God gave him to do down to the last detail, including Good Friday. And his disciples in turn glorified him – or as Eugene Peterson translates v.10, Jesus' "life is on display in them."

If we have any hope of glorifying God the way Jesus did, if there's any chance we're going to display Jesus' life in our life together, then we're going to need all the help we can get – and if that help includes Jesus praying for us, so much the better!

We need to remind ourselves now and then that Jesus prays for us. We might even take that as a starting point in defining who we are: We are a community for whom Jesus prays. What would that say about how we see ourselves – our strengths, our possibilities, our mission in the world? Or if we want to really feel humble, what would it mean if we really believed that God's glory and Jesus' glory are on the line in the way we live as a church and as Christians?

Because aren't God's glory and Jesus' glory on the line? After all, what do people have to judge God and Jesus by if not by us? All the things that we consider the church's mission – serving the poor, working for justice and peace, being instruments of healing and reconciliation, loving the world – all of them have an even higher purpose, and that's glorifying God. They may be good in themselves, but we don't do them out of some vague philanthropic sentiment; we do them because God commands and expects us to do those things.

We glorify God by daring to continue Christ's ministry. Of course, that means taking the risk of Jerusalem, setting ourselves against all the forces that nailed Jesus to the cross.

To be completely honest, I find the idea of Jesus praying for us – and for me – to be a mixed blessing. On the positive side, we couldn't ask for a better advocate. But on the negative side, the thought that Jesus prays for us is an enormous challenge. It challenges us to be absolutely clear about what we believe and what we expect and how we're going to live. How much compromise can we accept and still be faithful? How comfortable can we get with the powers that crucified Jesus? How far can we go in accommodating the world?

The thought that Jesus prays for us is a challenge because Jesus said some awfully radical things – and sometimes I'm afraid we, including myself, don't do much more than pay lip service to what he said. When Jesus prays for us, the gist of his prayer is that we will live lives that are faithful and worthy of our calling to be his disciples.

I've got a sermon series in mind for this summer with the overall theme "I Wish Jesus Hadn't Said That" because he said a lot of things that fall in that category. I said a bit last Sunday about Jesus' command that we love our enemies. That's just one example of something I wish he hadn't said. Can you imagine Jesus praying that we find the courage to love our enemies as he loved his? Can we get our heads around the radical notion that loving our enemies might be a way to glorify God?

With Jesus praying for us, doesn't that compel us to take his actual message seriously? Otherwise we're saying that Jesus' most fervent hopes for us don't matter.

Too often Jesus gets turned into a front man for programs that hurt the people he cared most about or turned into some kind of self-help guru who wants to free us to reach our full human potential.

That's not the Jesus I find in the gospel. That's not the Jesus I imagine praying for us. The Jesus who prays for us is the Jesus who set out on a quest to bring God's new world into being. The Jesus who prays for us is the Jesus who risked the journey to Jerusalem. The Jesus who prays for us is the Jesus who calls us to take the same risks.