

BIBLE READINGS: 1 John 5:9-13 John 17:6-19

SERMON

One of the ironies of our spiritual lives is that we can have a hard time seeing the Jesus of the Gospels as tender and vulnerable. We profess belief in a tenderhearted Jesus - that's part of our faith. Have we always understood intellectually that Jesus was an empathetic person? maybe. But its true to say that when we read the New Testament we often read of Jesus in its pages as austere and dispassionate.

Trying to see Jesus's full humanity in the Gospel accounts, can be hard when he often seems so disturbingly single-minded. So sure of himself, his God, and his mission that he doesn't seem to experience the vulnerable-making emotions that follow from love - uncertainty, anxiety, dread, and helplessness. Did Jesus ever fear for his loved ones? Did he ever doubt or backtrack on their behalf? When he asked his closest friends to take up their crosses and follow him, did he shudder at the thought of what those crosses would cost them?

The answer to each of these questions is surely yes. But the distance from our brains to our hearts - the journey from knowing intellectual to trusting spiritually - is a long one. So we are blessed when a Gospel passage bridges that distance.

This week's reading from John's Gospel on the seventh Sunday after Easter, the Revised Common Lectionary does this with just three words: "I am asking." The setting is the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday. Jesus has just washed his disciples' feet, foreseen Judas's betrayal, predicted Peter's denial, promised his disciples the Holy Spirit, and taught them as if time is running out. Which it is.

In the final moments before his arrest, he "looks toward heaven and prays." It's certainly not polished and poetic. 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 as he did with the Lord's Prayer; he's rending his heart.

"I am asking."

Hear these words - the strange and heartbreaking vulnerability of them. Jesus spends his final moments with his friends in humble, anxious supplication. Jesus ends his ministry by asking into uncertainty. Hoping into doubt. Trusting into danger.

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.

Who is this Jesus, the one who pleads so earnestly? We think we know the Jesus who teaches, heals, resurrects, and feeds. But do we know this one? This vulnerable one who in this passage does the single hardest thing a friend, a lover, a spouse, a parent, a child, a teacher, a pastor ever does? Sends his cherished ones into a treacherous world on nothing but a hope and a prayer? Entrusts the treasures of her heart to the vast mystery that is intercession?

"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."

To wonder what role prayer plays in our world, a world rife with tragedy, injustice, and oppression, is to raise the hardest questions we can think of about God - questions we don't know how to answer. Does God intervene directly in human affairs? Does God's intervention - or lack of it - depend in any way on our asking? Can prayer "change" God?

For me, my beliefs about prayer have changed a lot over the years. I was raised to believe that God was interested in the mundane events of my family's life. We prayed for the dog - we prayed for the weather, we prayed for good grades at school. I was convinced that God intervenes very directly in human affairs, and that intercessory prayer had powerful and undeniable "real world" effects. As a child, I believed with all my heart that prayer heals diseases, prevents car accidents, feeds hungry children in far away countries, fends off nightmares, prevents premature death, and "stops the bad guys." As I grew up and left the faith bubble of my family home, much of that certainty collapsed under the weight of life experience - some diseases didn't get better, car accidents happened, babies starved, young people died, and "bad guys" won the day. I was given two answers why this happened: 1) You need to pray with more faith, and 2) Sometimes God's answer is no. Both answers struck me then - and strike me now - as glib and trite.

Today, we live along the borders of a more complicated world. There are those who pray for parking spots, lost house keys, Lotto numbers.... and there are those who avoid intercessory 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 Claus."

The challenge of intercessory prayer is that it's subjective. What looks like God's "yes" in my eyes might easily look like his "no," his silence, or even his non-existence in yours. When is an "answer to prayer" really an answer? When is it coincidence? Randomness? A trick of the light? The cost of our liberty - a cost God daily chooses to endure - is that we can't say for sure. Not in this lifetime.

So why pray? One answer is that we pray because we are compelled to do so. Because something in us cries out for engagement, relationship, attentiveness, and worship. We pray because our soul yearns for connection with an Other who is God, and that connection is best forged in prayer. With words, without words, through laughter, through tears, in hope, and in despair, prayer holds open the possibility that we are not alone, and that this broken, aching world isn't alone, either. We pray, as C.S Lewis writes, "because I can't help myself." Because "the need flows out of me all the time - waking and sleeping."

That's a reasonable answer. But maybe this week's Gospel reading offers us another one: we pray because Jesus did. We ask because Jesus asked. Asking is the last thing he did before his arrest. The last tender memory he gave his friends. He didn't awe them with a grand finale of miracles. Neither did he contemplate their futures and despair. He looked up to heaven with a trembling heart, and surrendered his cherished ones to God.

Jesus asked because he loved. May we always do likewise.

Acknowledgement: Debie Thomas