

A Mother's Prayer
John 17:20-26
May 12, 2002

20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, 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.

24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

This passage from John 17 is one of the most intimate passages in scripture. The setting is at the Last Supper and Jesus knows everything is about to change. He knows they will struggle with his death, question his resurrection, and fumble the future. He had given them everything - all of his heart and soul. For three years he walked with them, taught them, corrected them, challenged them, and changed them. Tomorrow he would die, but they would remain. They would have to go on living in the same world that would reject and crucify him.

Out of the depths of his heart welled up a prayer - a prayer Jesus prayed aloud FOR his disciples. It is a beautiful, loving, tender prayer. Our scripture reading for today is just a small portion of that prayer. First, Jesus acknowledges that these disciples are a gift from God, entrusted to him, for the purpose of revealing God. And then Jesus prays three things for the disciples:

- 1) He prays for God to protect them.
- 2) He prays for God to help them accept each other and get along.
- 3) He prays for God to fill them with joy.

Have you ever had the experience of someone praying out loud for you? Then you know how powerful - how tender - how intimate this scene is. It can be one of the most moving and touching moments of your whole life. I don't know....but I suspect that at many points in your life, prayers have been prayed for you. Jesus' prayer is very much like the prayers that mothers pray all the time. Prayers that begin with the simple words, "Oh, God."

I can remember the spring I was 10 years old. It was about this time of the year when kids were graduating and kids were anxious for summer to begin. I was down in the basement of our old farm house, playing or looking for something. The phone rang, and a few seconds later I heard lots of commotion upstairs, like everyone was running around. I got curious so I began to head upstairs. As I got to the back door landing my mother came bursting through the kitchen door, she was still buttoning up her blouse, the mint green polyester one. I could see the distress in her eyes. All I heard her say was, "Oh, God, Oh, God." as she bolted through the back door, my dad

running out behind her. I learned from my sister that there had been an accident and they weren't sure that my brother was going to make it.

"Oh, God, Oh, God," was her prayer, it was a prayer coming from her utter powerlessness to save her child. "Oh, God, Oh, God" I imagine she said it all the way to the hospital.

Of all the prayers that are prayed in this world, I imagine that a good majority are for children, young and old, prayed by mother's who feel powerless to protect their children from all harm, and pain, and sadness.

There is a prayer that new mother's pray when they bring their baby home for the first time. They lay their baby in the crib and turn on their Fisher Price intercom - and as they lay their heads on their pillows they listen. Maybe it's then that they realize for the first time that they cannot listen for their baby's every breath. Eventually, they too, must allow themselves to drift off to sleep. It's a surrendering of sorts, a surrendering of the care and protection of that baby to the God that neither slumbers nor sleeps... "Oh God, keep watch over my baby."

Life is a series of those prayers, especially as kids move from one stage to the next.

Letting go on the first day of daycare - Oh, God....

They toddle off to preschool - Oh, God....

Handing over the car keys, Oh, God...

The first date, Oh, God....

The second date, Oh, GOD....

Graduation from high school, Oh God....

And the prayers continue at each stage of life: college, marriage, parenthood.

To the time when your children may have to be your caregivers.

To the time when your children will have to go on without you. Oh, God...

Abraham Lincoln once said, "I remember my mother's prayers and they have always followed me. They have clung to me all my life." Oh, God....

Jesus was letting go...but first he prayed. It is a prayer that echoes through the ages, often times from the mouths of mothers, and it begins, "Oh, God..."

Oh, God...these disciples were yours and you gave them to me. How many times have we said that children are a gift from God? It is as if, in this moment, Jesus has forgotten their failures, their doubts, their stubbornness, their outbursts....he has forgotten what they did and what they were yet to do....and he sees only precious gifts from God. He speaks like an adoring mother - and he prays a mother's prayer.

Jesus prayed, "Oh, God, protect them in your name." Jesus knew that he couldn't be with them anymore -- he couldn't show them the exact steps to take - he wouldn't be there to protect them from themselves and others. Jesus prayed, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world; but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." Notice that Jesus did not pray that his disciples not ever feel pain, or experience tragedy, or persecution. He rather prayed that they would

always be aware of God's faithful love and presence. Jesus knew the road ahead would not be easy for them -- all he could do was say, "O God, protect them."

Jesus also prayed that his disciples might be perfectly one - that they get along with each other and care for each other and share with one another. No longer could Jesus be present for each disciple and so he prayed that they would care for each child of God with the same kind of love he had for each one of them. "Oh God, make them one."

The last thing Jesus prayed for was joy. He said, "I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves." Jesus wasn't talking about the world's kind of joy - joy from success or wealth or material things - Jesus was talking about the kind of joy that exists in a person when he/she has an abiding relationship with God; joy that comes from knowing that God is ever present, ever faithful, and ever building God's kingdom on earth.

Jesus' heartfelt prayer was that we might know the life God intended for us... a life of peace, mercy, and justice for all of God's children. Jesus' prayer was that we continue his work of healing love...

In 1870, Julia Ward Howe made her famous Mother's Day proclamation – she was calling mothers to pray and to act.

Arise then...women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts!

Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly:

"We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies,

Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage,

For caresses and applause.

Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn

All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.

We, the women of one country,

Will be too tender of those of another country

To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

From the bosom of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with

Our own. It says: "Disarm! Disarm!

The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."

Blood does not wipe out dishonor,

Nor violence indicate possession.

As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil

At the summons of war,

Let women now leave all that may be left of home

For a great and earnest day of counsel.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.

Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means

Whereby the great human family can live in peace...

Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,

*But of God.*¹

Howe created Mother's Day as a protest for peace – and when it became sentimentalized and hijacked by the chocolate and flower industries she gave her every last cent and her sanity to fight it.

What she fought for was for us to recognize that every child is a mother's beloved and God's beloved. We should want for every child what we want for our children – peace, mercy, and justice.

The nearly one thousand young female factory workers, killed when they were ordered to work in a nine-story factory when the building was in obvious distress and ultimately collapsed, those women had mothers who wanted more for them than a life of slavery sewing American and Canadian clothes.

The discovery of three women, held captive and tortured for more than ten years, opened our eyes once again to the precious children abducted and trafficked around the globe for the satisfaction of someone's violent sexual lust. These children have mothers who never cease their search or prayer.

I could go on and on and speak endless hours about how we so easily forget that Jesus' prayer is not just for us – it is for all. It is Jesus' plea that we might live the lives God intends and stop treating other people's children as expendable or somehow less precious and valuable.

I believe - that Jesus' prayer - continues to fall from the lips of mothers around the globe - who have big dreams and deep fears - who love fiercely and hold loosely - who encourage loudly and nudge gently - who give birth to a lifetime of letting go and holding near.

Ten years ago I had to tell my mother that my brother was dead on the phone and I felt her heartbreak across the miles. I heard her pray, once again, "Oh God..." I use that memory and that moment to imagine God's heartbreak for the brokenness of this world and I hear again Jesus' prayer for us. It is not just an affirmation of God it is a call to action and an invitation to a way of seeing others as God sees us.

Oh God, we pray, teach us how to live so that we might have life, know peace, and find joy!

¹ <http://codepinkalert.org/article.php?id=217>