

I want to tell you some good news this morning. Jesus prayed for me. There, in the upper room when the air was heavy with the darkness of death, Jesus prayed for me and for you, for we who have come to believe. And that is the good news for us today.

Those of you familiar with the great prayer of John 17 will recall that it begins after Jesus' closing words to his disciples. "Take courage," he says, "For I have conquered the world." Then, looking up to heaven, he says: "Father, the hour has come."

The time of his glorification has come. The time of crucifixion that will lead to resurrection, ascension and a kingdom that will have no end, has come. So, he prays.

First, for himself: "Father, glorify your Son, so that the Son may glorify you."

Then he prays for his disciples, that curious band of fisherman, tax collectors and sinners, zealots and women on whom the success of his mission will depend. Protect them from the evil one, he prays. Sanctify them in the truth of your word.

And, lastly, he prays for us, and all those not there but who have come to believe in him through the work of countless disciples, known and unknown.

He prayed for Paul and Silas, who only a few years later found themselves bound and chained in the Philippian jail, bodies bruised and bleeding from being whipped. As Jesus prayed for them, they prayed and sang hymns to God.

Jesus prayed for John the Revelator, who was sent to Patmos because he proclaimed the word of God and testified about Jesus, and there in exile he wrote about the book of the seven seals and ended his vision with this prayer – Amen. Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus.

For them and for us, Jesus prayed, his heart opening, arms wide to embrace the world. This is a different picture of Jesus from that found in the synoptic gospels. Here, there is no misery in Gethsemane. No agony and bloody sweat. Only a prayer from the heart, and a plea for you and me.

And what does he pray? That we may be one, as he and the Father are one – I in them and you in me that they may be completely one. Why? So the world may know that his mission of love, restoration and reconciliation comes from God. Our witness to this is evidence of his existence. Jesus prays just as we pray in our Prayers of the People: That we all may be one.

And there are these words from one of our Eucharistic prayers: Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. ... Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ that we may worthily serve the world in his Name.

We don't pray for division, or to be in competition, or to have one denomination condemned and our own exalted. No. This is our petition: Grant that all who share this bread and cup may become one body and one spirit, a living sacrifice in Christ to the praise of your name. Jesus prayed that we would have a breakthrough, that we would become what we receive from his holy altar and make our belief in him real in our lives. And he prays this knowing who we are, how

frail and fickle and prone to division we can be. Prone to wander, we sing. Prone to leave the God I love.

Yet, he believed in us. And that is one of the greatest beauties of this prayer. Not only did Jesus pray for us, he believed in us, that we would be here, gathered together in his name.

There in the midst of his passion, surrounded by betrayal, deception, denial and fear; there with his arrest in the Kidron Valley only minutes away, he prays, knowing that from the seed of his sacrifice a new Body would grow and flourish in disparate, peculiar and beautiful ways. And he would rejoice as in Luke's Gospel when the 70 returned and he exclaimed: I saw Satan fall like lightning from the sky!

And, even though at times the Church's witness falls woefully short, its institutions complicit in evil or silent to the world's pain, Jesus and his enduring truth remains its touchstone. His heart of love continues to beat in ours.

This became so real to me a few years ago as I struggled through history's nightmare to make my way to faith. I found no solace in the Bible and my grandma's heartfelt hallelujahs. My solace was found in Eldridge Cleaver's "Soul on Ice," "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," and Robert Hayden's tremendous poem, "Middle Passage," where I read:

"Jesus Savior Pilot Me

Over life's tempestuous sea

Thou Who Walked On Galilee

Pilot Oh Pilot Me

Middle Passage, Journey Through Death to Life Upon these shores"

I read and pondered and asked: How, Lord? How can I turn to you without turning my back on harms present and harms past? How?

Well, the Lord came to me in a vision, like something out of the Book of Revelation. He came to me because he prayed for me, prayed that we would meet and that I would believe, not blindly, but with heart and mind wide open to the world, and that I would join with you and all those who strive to make his name known. And there is this, too, he prayed for me because he loved me. Not in the mere sentimental way of a Sunday nursery rhyme, but intensely, fiercely and eternally. Jesus's high priestly prayer of John 17 is an act of deep, deep love and compassion.

Brothers and sisters, as we go about our lives, let us never forget that Jesus prayed for us and is praying for us. Now, during these moments of worship, he prays that we may be protected from the evil one, that we may be sanctified in the truth and power of his living word, and that we, despite our myriad and faltering ways, may be one with him, proclaiming not ourselves, or our church, but Jesus Christ as Lord, for we are his servants; we are those for whom he prays.

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