

May 17, 2015  
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John 17:6-19

### Words Overheard

We get to overhear Jesus praying today. That's what we are given in the gospel, a chance to listen in on what God the Son says, when he has a conversation with God the Father. Today's reading, chapter seventeen of the gospel of John, is known as the "high priestly prayer of Jesus." With a title like that, you know it's significant, and the timing of it further adds to its importance. In the narrative arc of John's gospel, it is the night that Jesus will be betrayed. After years of ministry, Jesus has gathered the disciples for a last evening together. They share a meal, he washes their feet, and then he gives them final instructions, reminders and exhortations—three chapters worth of them. All of that happens just prior to today's reading, chapter 17, in which Jesus prays, and we get to hear it—we get to overhear what Jesus says in prayer!

And it's really hard to understand. Just what is Jesus saying here? The sentences seem to cycle around themselves, phrases and words repeating. There's I and you and them and mine and the world and the word... I approach John 17 with great anticipation, but reading it I often feel more mystified, not less. There's a part of me that finds some comfort in this. If this is how Jesus' prayer sounds, maybe it's okay that mine are so convoluted. Sometimes, often times, I'll find myself worrying over something, and I try to talk about it with God, but my prayer becomes repetitive, circular, confusing.

Perhaps Jesus' prayer in John 17 can sound like that, too. Perhaps part of that comes because it is a prayer that is overheard. John 17 is intricately complex, and one sermon on one section of it won't make it all clear, but Jesus' prayer can help us, in and through our confusion. Jesus' prayer can help us in our prayers, because it is for us, that Jesus is praying. Two things about Jesus' prayer for us today: one a single phrase, one a repeated word.

First, and this is a small part of the prayer, but still, it stands out to me: the part about "the one destined to be lost." This is a reference to Judas, who after the dinner and the footwashing left the room, left, as we know, to betray Jesus. That Judas is mentioned in Jesus' prayer feels ominous, and much as I might like to, I don't think it can be ignored. As if underscoring that, Judas comes up in today's first reading as well, in the story from Acts, in which the disciples find a replacement for Judas. I think Judas comes up also in our collective consciousness. As I was leading our first communion lessons recently, standing at the table with the students, talking about the words of institution and how this holy meal was given on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, one of the students asked, so very thoughtfully and solemnly, "Did Judas know what he was doing?" Did Judas know? Could Judas know the extent of his betrayal? That by doing so, he quickened a chain of events that would lead to the crucifixion of the Son of God?

What about Judas? Why is he referenced in these readings, in this prayer, in the words of institution—and what might that mean for us? This reference that Jesus makes, which is translated in other Bibles as "the son of destruction," is not the only mention of opposition in Jesus' prayer. Jesus asserts that the world will hate those who follow him, asserts that aligning yourself with him can be dangerous, that those who do need protection, guarding. Jesus is very clear in this prayer, and in his ministry as a whole, that following him does not eliminate painful, treacherous experiences, betrayals. That there is destruction, that evil and antagonistic forces are present in our lives, is acknowledged outright in Christian faith. Judas is there, not just in our collective consciousness, but in our experience. Becoming a disciple, becoming part of a church, does not mean you will not encounter people who betray you, who threaten you, who make life

difficult.

You can probably think of a person who has made your life difficult. You can probably think of someone who works against you. Maybe it's someone at your work – a colleague, who is not being collegial, or maybe it's someone who reports to you, but who's not doing what they should be doing; or maybe it's your supervisor, who is not being a supervisor, but whose poor leadership is undermining everything.

Or perhaps the person with whom you are having difficulty is in your neighborhood. They supported a different candidate, or vision for the community. They take up too much parking. They've let their dog poop on your lawn and don't clean it up. That one's not just a maybe, this is fresh news from our latest church staff meeting: someone's dog is pooping in our auxiliary parking lot. Really!? (It better not be my dog...)

You can probably think of someone leaving a pile of—stuff—on your lot. Maybe the way they are messing with your life, their opposition, is intentional, or maybe it's unintentional, maybe they don't realize the extent and implications of the harm they are doing. But it's there. And it brings up bad feelings, which cycle through your consciousness.

Mention that person in prayer, like Jesus did. Refer to them. Don't ignore it, acknowledge the wrong, and lay it before God. Turn it over to the Father in prayer, as Jesus does here, and as Jesus does in another prayer for us, on the cross. Jesus said a prayer there, too, a prayer for us and for the whole world—and so surely also for Judas. On the cross Jesus prays, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Second—the second of the two things about Jesus' prayer for us today, the one that is a word that is repeated numerous times in John 17. In fact, this word is repeated more often in this chapter than in any other chapter of the New Testament. Interestingly enough, in its various forms this word is mentioned seventeen times in John 17. That word is "give." Jesus makes the Father's name known to the ones the Father has given him. Everything Jesus has is given to him by the Father. Jesus gives to those who follow him what the Father has given him. Jesus gives them the word. Giving is a main theme of Jesus prayer, in the part we read today, and the verses before and after, and another verse we know from the gospel of John, John 3:16: God so loved—God so loved this world in all its opposition—God so loved the world that he gave...

Giving is who God is and what God does. Giving is the basis of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, given to us on Pentecost, and it's that very same relationship that God wants for us. God wants for us what God is. That's the heart of Jesus' high priestly prayer. That's why we bring our children here, why we bring ourselves here, why we are committing to steps for our future here, because that's what we want to be, God's giving and forgiving people.

I had a phone call earlier this week from someone who had come to church here years ago, he was in the Confirmation class of 1945, he told me proudly. He called because he had given a donation to the Gym campaign some months ago. In fact, he gave a gift to the campaign before we even had a campaign, he just sent it in out of the blue. I asked him how he knew about it. He wasn't on our newsletter list, he just overheard from someone that we were going to do this, and the Gym and this church had been important to him. His call a couple days ago was because he heard this Sunday was something special with the campaign. He asked, with some eagerness, was the Gym done? No, it's not done yet, I said, but work is underway. We're so thankful for all the contributions, and he was welcome to join us for worship and the special meal today. Well, he said, he would, except that it's Confirmation Sunday at his church, and he wants to be there for that. He would try to come another Sunday.

That man learned something here, what children are learning here, what we are all learning here, to be the people Jesus prays for us to be, and gives us to be, by and in his word.