

May 13, 2018 – The Seventh Sunday of Easter. Mother’s Day
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 17:6-19

The Other Lord’s Prayer

We’ve got the other Lord’s Prayer today. There are a couple versions of the Lord’s Prayer. Today and lately we’ve been saying an other one. The differences are slight, but enough that you’ll notice, if you are not used to it. A pastor I know tells how he started ministering at a church that used an other version than the one he was used to. He confessed: “I’m a trespasser in a land of debtors.” Here at IPLC we’d been trespassing for some time, but recently we’re admitting it’s our sins that need forgiving. Would that walking across someone else’s yard was the extent of our problems. There are some other differences in the Lord’s Prayers: Whether there’s an “art” and “thy’s.” I do have a soft spot for the old poetry of those. “Temptation” or “trial” and how God is implicated in either. I have to agree with the pope on that one—this was in the news last spring—I have to agree with the pope that we should affirm in our petitions that God does not lead us into trouble, but saves us from it.

But all of this is actually off topic, as I can get when it comes to word choice. When I began this sermon by saying we have the other Lord’s Prayer today, I was not referring to the prayer that we say just before we receive communion. I am referring to the prayer that we hear in today’s gospel. That reading today from the gospel of John, in fact all of John chapter seventeen, is the other Lord’s Prayer. John seventeen may even have a better claim to that title than the prayer we say every week, for that prayer is—or really should be—our prayer. Jesus gave it to us. He did so when the disciples asked him, “Lord, how do we pray?” And so Jesus said, “I’ll teach you. I’ll give you the words. Do it like this... Our Father...” But in John seventeen we find not a prayer our Lord gave us, but one our Lord himself prayed.

The scene is intimate, Jesus is with his disciples, around a meal, for a last time, a last supper, it is the night he will be betrayed. Jesus has washed the disciples’ feet, and given them parting words, the Farewell Discourse, we heard part of that as the gospel reading last week. Today we continue on after that, and it turns out that Jesus does have one more speech. Before heading out into the Garden of Gethsemane and all that will come after that, Jesus has something else to say, to someone else, something even more intimate. Jesus prays.

It’s a complicated prayer; John seventeen is a notoriously complex passage. It’s tricky to read aloud, listen to, make sense of, diagram. Subject and object and indirect object trade places. There’s an awful lot of pronouns, with antecedents that are not exactly clear, plus a plethora of clauses. Requests are made, repeated, rephrased, re-examined. The sheer impenetrability of this passage, of our Lord’s Prayer, can be daunting.

There’s also a way in which I find it comforting. Not only that our Lord prays, and how moving that is, but I am also comforted by the indecipherability of it. Likely this complexity has to do with Jesus’ divinity; there are things about God that I do not understand. But possibly the nature of the prayer also has to do with Jesus’ humanity. Perhaps, on that most intense of evenings, Jesus’ mind was racing. He knew what he had to do, but it did not make it easy. There would be effects not only him, but on people he cared about. Things wouldn’t be easy for them, either, and they, too, would affect what happened and what happened after. Knowing this, feeling this, Jesus talks it out, prays, and it comes out sounding, well, strange. There is comfort to me in this. I think, if this is what Jesus sounds like in prayer, perhaps it’s okay that my prayers are so tangled. If this is our Lord’s Prayer, perhaps it’s okay that my petitions repeat and

run on and circle back on themselves. I, too, can offer them, my concerns, my convictions, my questions, I too can offer them to our Father.

Like the other Lord's Prayer, sometimes called the "Our Father," today's prayer emphasizes relationship, the closeness that is ours, the bond that we have with one another and to our source, because we all share that same source. We hear this in two words, "Our Father." We also hear them in our Lord's prayer today, as Jesus prays, "Holy Father...all are yours." As Jesus does, so also we can refer to the creator of the universe, the architect of being, with a term of familial bond, a term used by very young children, often one of the first words they learn. In the original language of the text, that word is "Abba."

The term is inarguably masculine, but God is not. God is neither male, nor female. God just is—the antecedent that has no antecedent. So it is that pronouns are tricky with God. Using the pronouns "he" and "she" in reference to God are both equally admissible, and equally wanting. We can only refer to God with the limited language we have, always keeping in mind its limitations. We can only imagine God with images available to us, while also being mindful how very many available images there are, and have always been.

So it is this Sunday, Mother's Day, I cannot help but note how this Prayer of our Lord in John seventeen sounds maternal. Perhaps it is because I am a mother, but I cannot help but note how much Jesus' prayer sounds like prayers I pray for my children, like prayers my mother prays for me. Three aspects of Jesus' prayer stand out in this maternal way:

First, there is the emphasis on protection. In another gospel, Jesus likens himself to a mother hen who longs to gather her chicks under wings and keep them safe. We can think of other animal mothers who fiercely protect their young. We can think of human mothers who have done this, ways we have done this. Jesus does this too, Jesus prays for protection for the disciples, people whom just a couple verses earlier he has called his "little children." Jesus wants to protect them. And Jesus knows, too, as mothers do, that there are times you cannot. There is pain you cannot prevent your child from experiencing. It's part of being in the world, and that's where we live.

Yet, even though we live here, we are not of us this world. This, too, reminds me of a mother's insight, this thing that Jesus says, several times, that though we are in the world, we are not of it. Becoming a mother made me acutely aware of worldly processes: the physiology of pregnancy, the biology of childbirth, the effect of environment, the critical impact of nurture. And yet for all of that, there are so many times I have looked at my offspring and wondered, "Where did you come from?" There is something inescapably otherworldly about every single child, whether they happen to share one's DNA or not. In all cases we know that they come from us, and do not, are not ours in the end. They do not belong to us. Ultimately, truly, they belong to God.

Lastly, like a mother who says to her child, "I don't care what career you choose, I don't care about the particulars of the life you make and the people you make it with, I just want you to be happy," so also Jesus prays for our well-being in the broadest possible sense. Jesus does not say, "Go to this school, pursue this career, marry this person." In fact, Jesus does not even say, "I just want you to be happy." Jesus prays for something even bigger than that. Jesus prays that his children have joy, "joy made complete in themselves." What a moving announcement, the epitome of parental hope: that your child, that every child, knows God's joy made complete in themselves, the joy of being who they are created to be.

Jesus prays for this, for us. We hear that prayer today, and we join it, at the table of our Lord, we join our prayers with our great high priest, our mothering Christ, until he comes as victorious Lord of all.