

A photograph of a brick wall with ivy growing on it. The ivy is green and covers the top half of the wall. The bricks are reddish-brown and arranged in a traditional pattern. A semi-transparent dark green rectangle is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, containing the title and date.

Belonging to God

JOHN 17:6-23 | SEPTEMBER 5, 2021

BELONGING TO GOD

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We are jumping ship this morning and leaving the gospel of Mark behind to dip into the gospel of John instead. It is strange to realise that both Mark and John are writing about the same people from the same place – the two books could not be more different! Each of the four gospels, as I'm sure many of you know, has its own unique style: Mark is very terse and proceeds at an almost breathless pace, leaping from one action-packed moment to the next; we certainly have rediscovered that in the last two weeks, going from the high drama of a storm at sea to the eerie, powerful display of freeing the suffering man who lived among the dead on the Gentile side of the lake.

John is something else entirely though. Did you know that it's recommended that new believers or first-time readers of the Bible start with the gospel of John? John begins at the beginning of everything, with a retelling of the creation story, centered on Jesus as the Word of God.

Actually, the whole gospel of John focuses very closely on Jesus: on who he is, what he's like, and what he's done. That's why it's recommended reading for new Christians – because it introduces Jesus in a very full, all-encompassing way. And it is beautiful to read; it's written in an almost poetic style in places, like today's passage. That said, John's poetic and lyrical way of writing sometimes seems to meander a bit, and it can be hard to follow. To put this passage in context, it's a prayer, part of the farewell discourse, that last evening of conversation and fellowship Jesus had with his disciples before his death. In fact, Jesus is arrested at the very beginning of John 18, moments after he finishes praying.

All of John 17 is a prayer, and the part we read today is an intercessory prayer; it's Jesus praying for his disciples, and it comes from his deep love for them and his concern for their future after he's gone. Jesus asks for God's presence and guidance because his disciples – his followers – are about to become something new: apostles. No longer will they follow Jesus just for themselves, focused only on learning and growing their own faith, deciding if this whole belief in Jesus is for them. Now, they're going to be sent out into the world to proclaim Jesus and to be witnesses to God's justice and love. This is a moment of transition as Jesus prepares them to take on responsibility for God's mission to the world.

Let's look more closely at what Jesus prays. Even though the disciples have sometimes been a little fuzzy and confused about who Jesus is, he vouches for them (vv.6-8): "Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8 for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me."

And then, as Jesus prepares to depart from the world, he prays for God the Father to protect his disciples. He reminds God that he has protected them in his Father's name: "And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

Jesus is making a point – that the disciples are one with Jesus and God the Father, and that he's been acting in unity with the Father, just as the disciples will act in unity with them both. Jesus is demonstrating their closeness, reminding God that what the disciples share with Jesus, they also received from and share with the Father. They've shared in Jesus' knowledge of God's truth, but also in his work: they are being sent into a world that they don't belong to, and they'll be hated by that world because of the Word they bear and the work they will do...just like Jesus.

Instead of belonging to the world, just like Jesus, they belong to God. Jesus prays this way – restating the connection between God the Father and Jesus and his disciples – in order to reinforce the continuity of relationship among them. It's creating a bond and establishes that, just as Jesus does, the disciples belong to the triune God. And so, Jesus prays that God will protect them.

When you hear the word protect, what do you think of? Something that shields you or stands between you and danger, like a good sturdy wall or maybe a good, sturdy person; someone or something that either stands firm or steps in to stop you being hurt. And the dictionary definition is "to keep safe from harm or injury." But the Greek word by which Jesus' words have been recorded for us has a richer meaning; there's a quality to that protection that we miss in English. The emphasis is on the "keeping" part of the definition.

To protect means taking care of someone and paying attention to them, and making abundant provision for them. It's the same word that's used elsewhere to describe the kind of care and attention that parents give to their children. So while God is more than capable of being our shield and defender, Jesus is also

praying that God will care for and tend to and be present for the disciples with the same loving, parental care that Jesus himself has received.

An important part of how Jesus maintained and enjoyed his relationship with God while on earth was prayer.

When we read Jesus' prayer in John, it's easy to get a bit hung up on all the relational language of "mine" and "yours" and "they are in me as I am in you;" that part can read a bit more like a tongue-twister than a clear, understandable sentence. But what it signifies is simply the tremendous intimacy Jesus shares with the Father, which he is inviting his disciples to share, too. Jesus is sharing what is most deeply in his heart at the moment: that God would take care of his friends now that he has to leave them behind. Jesus prays as a way to connect, to reach back along the flow of love and care to his Father, to have a conversation with God. And that's what prayer can be for us, too.

In his book *Opening to God*, David Benner writes: "For decades my prayers were nothing more than a monologue. I did all the talking, and I never once considered that God might be doing more than listening. The problem was not with my understanding of prayer, but that I didn't take it seriously enough. If I had really believed that prayer was conversation, I would not have been nearly as rude as I was. I would have talked less and listened more."

Prayer is a fascinating thing. It's one of the most important spiritual practices we have as Christians, and yet it's not unique to our faith. Prayer requires a tremendous depth of faith, a certainty on some level that our words and thoughts are heard, that they're not getting lost in the rafters, or hitting the ceiling and falling down to the floor. Prayer also requires a lot of confidence that God cares and that he's listening, and it is far easier to have that faith and that confidence if the conversation is happening within a close relationship with God. How we pray influences the shape of that relationship.

Think of prayer as something with layers, maybe like an egg.

A lot of our praying – like our prayers of intercession that we make together every Sunday – a lot of our prayer is about what is going on around us, shaped by where and when we're living. These are the circumstances which surround us, near and far, that we can't easily change: events that happen on the other side of the world, big, global issues, problems or situations in our home countries and our communities. This layer of prayer also includes other people:

friends and family, loved ones and even strangers, people we know or know about who are struggling, who need a little grace or peace, some healing or hope in their lives.

Prayers about our where and our when – these are like the shell of the egg, the layer of our life that touches the world directly. The next layer – the white of the egg, if you will – is the “how” of our life, as in how we live: how we react to our circumstances, what we say and do in any given situation.

Even though we should always try to help where we can, it’s not always possible to immediately fix the big issues, the far-away problems...and we definitely can’t change other people! But what can change is how we respond. And this is how we pray for ourselves: we pray for growth in our faith, for transformation of how we think and act; we pray for help and guidance in how we deal with difficult situations. This is the part of our prayer that leads us forward in our spiritual journey, that shows us how we can grow stronger as we go and be made whole in relationship with God.

And the last layer is, of course, the best part of the egg – I mean, who doesn’t like dipping their buttery toast in a nice, runny egg yolk? – and it’s the best part of our prayer life, too.

This is the “who” prayer, praying that seeks the face of God. It’s prayer that listens with the intent to reach out to God, prayer that seeks to abide in Jesus and to open ourselves with the intent to have him abide in us.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus prays – in the morning, in the evening, in the middle of the night. On a mountain, on the plain, in homes and towns, alone or with friends; in thanksgiving, in distress, and for all kinds of reasons. Prayer isn’t only for church, or for mealtimes, or before bed. Prayer isn’t only a list of problems or names that need God’s intervention; it’s not just the evening news, rebroadcast via our lips to God’s ear. We can pray anytime, anywhere, about anything...and God is always eager to listen and even more eager, I suspect, to speak, to make it a two-way conversation. We don’t even have to use words – we can reach out with our minds and hearts, and meet God that way, too. We can pray when we’re driving to work or to the grocery store, while brushing our teeth, doing the dishes, gardening, having a cup of tea, or walking on the beach. Maybe don’t close your eyes for some of those prayers!

Anyone of those activities can be a time for prayer; they can also be a prayer themselves. The key is intent.

It is entirely possible to be in church, with your head bowed and eyes shut, hearing the words of a prayer, even saying those words together...and not really be praying. Not unless you intend it to be prayer. We need an awareness in our minds and hearts that we are, in fact, praying to God, and we must have the intent to seek God, to go into the presence of God and, through Jesus, to be heard and to hear from him. The intention to meet and be met by God, to converse with each other...that's what makes a prayer a prayer. That's why the location, the activity, the words or the absence of words aren't the central part of prayer. Those things – they can help us pray, but they aren't prayer on their own – it's the intent to connect, to reach back along the flow of love and care to Jesus' Father, to have a conversation with God.

We really can pray anytime; without ceasing, like the Bible says. Sounds simple enough. But that's part of what many of us are missing in our prayer lives: the sense that prayer wasn't meant to be extraordinary, perfectly worded, saved for certain places or times or reserved only for really important moments. Prayer is meant to be ordinary, part of the fabric of our daily lives, just as it was for Jesus.

Let's go back to the Gospel of John now. If we go a little further into John 17, to verse 20 – we hear Jesus say, “And I ask not only on behalf of these” – that is, his disciples – “but also on behalf of all those who will believe in me through their word.” That's us. The ones who will believe.

We believe in Jesus through the disciples' words, their witness as apostles sent into the world. So this prayer – for God's loving, protective, attentive, parental care – Jesus was including you and me in that prayer, too. Jesus was reaching outside of time to touch us and include us in this prayer, in this moment, on the last night of his earthly life. He is bringing us into God's presence, enfolding us within the life of the triune God; this is what Jesus does for us all the time, in every moment of prayer.

So I invite you this week to hear these words of Jesus as though they are addressed to you today. To imagine – to know – that Jesus knew you were on your way into this world, and he was praying for you all those years ago and that he continues to care for you, support you, and love and value you today.

That Jesus wants that same loving connection between God the Father and you and him, for you, today, just as he did for his first disciples, as he prepared to send them out into an unfriendly world. That the kind of relationship Jesus had with his Father while Jesus was lived on earth – a relationship of depth and trust and two-way conversation – it's entirely possible for us, too.

And prayer, as we see Jesus showing us, prayer is the way to build that relationship. If you're wondering how to do that, remember the egg!

Start with praying the shell: praying for the world, your community, the people around you, all the where's and when's of your life touching others. And then work your way in, praying for growth and transformation for yourself and how you live in your circumstances...and pray finally with the intent to reach out to God, listening and open and ready for God to reach back to you. Jesus prayed that you and he and God the Father would be as one. So pray like you belong to God, because you do. Thanks be to God! Amen.