

Wednesday Evening Service, May 20, 2020 - Reflection

Joining Jesus' Prayer Pastor Amy Zalk Larson

¹After Jesus had spoken these words [to his disciples], he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶"I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for 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. ⁹I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And 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."

Before he was arrested and crucified, Jesus prayed for his disciples - those first ones and all of us who came after them. He prayed and he prayed and he prayed for a really long time. In fact, today we just heard the first part of this prayer that ends up being over 600 words long - that's more like a short sermon than a prayer. And, Jesus offered this long prayer right after using more than 2100 words in his last sermon for his disciples, the Farewell Discourse. So, the next time a sermon goes long, I'm just saying, it could be worse.

In his final teachings and prayer, Jesus is unafraid of taking up space. He feels no need to apologize for talking for such a long time. As he takes up all this space, he reminds me of very talkative young children who are totally confident that others want to hear absolutely everything they have to say. It's beautiful to see a child share in a totally unfiltered way, not afraid to take up space - (especially if you've already had some quiet time and enough coffee.)

Somewhere along the way, we start to wonder if we're worthy of taking up so much space in the world. We filter, apologize and minimize our opinions or feel we should try to sound smarter and stronger and more powerful if we want our voice to be heard. We especially wonder if we're worthy when it comes to prayer and to relationship with God.

Jesus simply prays a rather long-winded, repetitive prayer, without apology. He trusts that he has a place in his Father's attention, a place in his Father's heart. He has that confidence of children who just start talking, who climb up into their parents' lap with the knowledge that they are fully welcome in that space.

And in this prayer, Jesus prays that we would have that same intimacy with God- that we would know that there is a place for us in God's heart. Throughout this Easter season we've talked a lot about how Jesus makes space for us in the heart of God. Yet we often struggle to experience that space, especially in prayer.

There are so many “shoulds”- things we feel we should do and should be that constrict us. We think our prayers should be carefully crafted, that we should believe them more, should know more, should have fewer doubts; or that we should do certain prayer practices and should have a carefully established prayer routine. We can feel so unworthy and inadequate in the presence of God. Besides all that, there are so many other things we feel we should be doing that keep us from praying. There is so much that gets in the way of feeling free to just take up space in the heart of God. Jesus knows all this and so he prays for us, he prays for you. Jesus claims space for you and draws you into a spacious, welcoming relationship with God. And he shows that prayer isn’t another thing you have to do, and do properly - it is simply claiming your space in God in any way you need at any given time. It is claiming your spot in the lap of God.

- You can be long winded and repetitive.
- You can be very angry or full of questions as we see in the Psalms.
- You can just say help, thanks, or wow as Anne Lamott points out in her book with that title.
- You can simply call to mind the faces of people you care about and entrust them to God.
- You can pray with the news by just taking a deep breath and asking God to open space within you and within others to respond to the pain of the world with compassion and wisdom. We’re already saying “oh my God” often as the news comes at us; just take a breath to open to God.
- Or you can just be quiet. You can just breathe or watch the river or look at the sky or listen to the birds. I’m guessing that’s how Jesus prayed often when he wasn’t wanting us to overhear him claim space in God for us.

Just listening, just paying attention to the mundane aspects of our lives in the presence of God who is also paying attention to them, is prayer. Mary Oliver captures this in her poem entitled “Praying”:

It doesn’t have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don’t try
to make them elaborate, this isn’t
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.

And if you find it hard to enter the doorway into thanks and silence, you can trust that Jesus prays for you and provides that doorway for you. Jesus provides a door into a spacious relationship with God.