

Easter 7B: John 17:6-19
Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. W. Terry Miller
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Our Man in Heaven

“You’re only as happy as your unhappiest child.” That’s what a mother of three now-grown children said to me one day. Anyone who’s a parent can appreciate that sentiment. And yet parents also know that as a matter of fact we cannot insure the happiness of our children. And worse, we know that the wider world most assuredly cannot be counted on to make that happiness a reality. Indeed, the wider world has millions of jagged edges ready to tear into their happiness and success and stability at a moment’s notice. The prospect of sending our children out into that world can thus be scary for parents, even though we know they must make their own way in this world.

Jesus is not the “parent” of his followers, but his love for them is at least as fervent as that of a mother or a father. And so as he anticipates his own departure, in today’s gospel, Jesus expresses the same concern that parents have for their children. He knows he will have to leave them, that they’ll have to keep working without him. And he knows it won’t be easy. He warned earlier, “if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” And now he acknowledges that “the world hates them, because they do not belong to the world.” Still, he knows he has to let them go. Only, he’s not sending them off on their own to sink or swim; rather, he prays for them, commending them into the care of his Father.

From the earliest days of Christian interpretation of John, this prayer, which runs the entirety of chapter 17, has been known as Jesus’ “high priestly prayer,” because in praying for his disciples, Jesus acts as an Old Testament high priest who stands before the Lord God, having made the necessary sacrifice, asking for forgiveness and blessings for his people. This act is not something most of us today are familiar with, but the high priest served a critical role among the people of Israel. Someone set aside, sanctified to act as high priest, would come to the Temple once a year to minister to God, to make atonement and to pray on behalf of the people. It was central to Israel’s relationship with God, to their maintaining their place as God’s people. Here Jesus is taking on that role, interceding with God on behalf of his disciples.

And this is not the last time Jesus does this. Last week we celebrated Christ’s ascension into heaven to the right hand of God. One of the implications of the ascension is that Jesus continues the ministry he began on earth, now in heaven. His high priestly work has been elevated, expanded, such that what he did that night in the Upper Room before his death—intercede for his followers—he now does eternally, forever, non-stop from heaven, at God’s right hand. The ascension may have completed Jesus’ mission on earth, tying heaven and earth together, as I said last week, but his work is not done. He continues his work now from heaven.

It’s not hard to see how much a boon this is to us, how because of Jesus we now have access to God. Diplomats and reporters used to talk about “our man in Washington” or “our man in Tokyo.” For Christians, Jesus is “our man in heaven.” He is there for us and on our behalf. He is our representative in heaven. Through him, we have an “in” with God.

It's like a story I read, about something that happened during the American Civil War. On account of a family tragedy, a soldier had been given permission to have a hearing with the President, in order to request exemption from military service. But when he arrived at the White House, he was refused entry and sent away. So he went to sit in a nearby park. And as he was sitting there, a young boy came over to him and remarked about how unhappy he looked. The soldier found himself pouring out his heart to the young fellow. And after he was done, the boy said, 'Look, come with me,' and the dejected soldier went back to the White House, only this time round the back. None of the guards stopped them—even the generals and the high-ranking government officials stood to attention and let them pass through. The soldier was amazed. How different it was from the last time he was at the White House! Finally they came to the presidential office. Without knocking, the boy led him into the west wing. The young boy opened the door of the Oval Office, walked straight in, and there was President Abraham Lincoln, standing there in conversation with the Secretary of State. The moment they walked in, Lincoln turned to the boy and said, "Todd, what can I do for you?" And Todd said, "Dad, this soldier needs to talk to you." He had access, through the son.

Through the Son, through Jesus, we have access to the Father. By virtue of Jesus' presence in heaven, we—our prayers, our deepest heart and highest thoughts—are raised up, present to the Father through Jesus.

More than that, though, more than Jesus relaying our prayers, our concerns to the Father, Jesus also prays *for us*. As the writer of the book of Hebrews puts it, "he lives forever to intercede with God on [our] behalf" (Heb 7:25). Similarly, in our first lesson, Paul declares that Christ Jesus, who was raised to life, "is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." (Romans 8:34) That is to say, he appeals to the Father on our behalf.

There is something wonderfully comforting about Jesus praying for us. Jesus prays for not in the sense that some Christians might say "I'm praying for you" as a backhand way of expressing judgment. He prays for us, rather out of love, wanting what's best for us, wanting us to enjoy the blessings of heaven, of the God's Kingdom in our lives.

This is good news for us. In our struggles to be faithful to God, it's good to know that Jesus is faithful to us. We don't practice the Christian faith alone; Christ prays for us. The Christian way is a demanding path to walk, requiring courage, conviction, and bold determination. None of us is supposed to walk the way of Christ alone; Jesus prays for us. We live among competing, often hostile belief systems. When we're not together in church, supporting each other, it's easy to lose heart and waver in our faith. Knowing that Jesus prays for us, *is* praying for us, makes it possible. We need his prayers, just as much as we need the prayers of our brothers and sisters. We can't do it on our own.

I know a person who suffered a great wrong at the hands of another. She was justifiably angry at the injustice perpetrated against her. In an encounter with her wrongdoer, her rage boiled over and she started "giving him a piece of my mind." In that moment, she said she "remembered that Christ commanded us to forgive our enemies. So I said, 'Lord, I'll try to do what you want me to do, but you'll have to help me.'"

That is what Jesus does—he helps us, by praying for us, advocating for us, lobbying the Father on our behalf. And this lobbying is personal. According to Hebrews, Jesus names us; in the midst of the congregation he sings the praises of his people, who Jesus unashamedly calls brothers. (Hebrews 2:11–13) Aaron, the first high priest in the Old Testament, wore a chest piece containing twelve gemstones, one for each of Israel's twelve tribes, in order to "carry the names of the tribes ... over his heart" as he entered into the Lord's presence (Ex 28:29). Likewise, Jesus, our great high priest, holds each of us near and dear to his heart as he presents us to the Father. He shows the Father the stones on his chest and says, "Here I am, and the children [you have] given me."

So, Jesus prays for us, pleads our case, "stands in the gap," as it were, in the gap between us and God, between eternal life and our demise. Our mediator and advocate.

Indeed, Jesus prays for us. But he also prays *with us*. You see, every time we conclude a prayer "in Jesus' name," as we often do, we are praying with Christ, who prays with us. This gives our prayers, our attempts to talk to and also listen to God, greater significance by marrying, uniting his prayers to ours.

We shouldn't be surprised then, as Jesus unites his prayers to ours, that our prayers are called up *into his*, that we are asked to join Jesus in his prayers. This is to say, if Jesus is our "prayer partner," that partnership goes both ways. Indeed, if Christ is now engaged praying for us, and we have been "seated with him in heavenly places" (Ephesians 2:6), as Paul says, that means we too will be drawn into his work of intercession, assuming a priestly, standing-in-the-gap gap posture *on behalf of others*.

You remember the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, from Genesis, and how he refused to let go until the angel blessed him? Those who take seriously their role as intercessor, likewise, hold on, refusing to let go until the Father blesses not them, but the family member, the friend, the relative, the neighbor, the people group or nation or whatever it is that Jesus seems to have laid on their heart. Intercessors stand in the gap for others, pleading to God on their behalf. "Lord, have mercy on them," they implore. "Don't hold it against them. Change their hearts. Cause them to turn to you. Lord, I will not let you go until you bless them."

Make no mistake. Joining with Christ in interceding for others is costly business. Oswald Chambers asserts that this is the primary way we share in Christ's sufferings. As we open ourselves to Jesus and to what is on his heart, we open ourselves to suffering and sacrifice on behalf of others, agonizing in prayer over the person or situation. We allow Jesus to break our hearts for what breaks his.

Sometimes, though, when we find ourselves drawn into that posture, we mistakenly take the burden of intercession on ourselves, as if somehow it depends on us or we have to "make it happen." Then we feel guilty when we fail to pray for others with the passion and fervor we feel we should.

Early in her ministry, Amy Carmichael, who spent over fifty years in south India, was given a deep burden for young girls who were dedicated to the Hindu gods and given to temple priests to earn money through prostitution. But as she began to take action to rescue these temple children, there came a point when the opposition—both human and demonic—became so intense she was ready to give up. Even some of her fellow missionaries stood against her. “You can't ‘rock the boat’ like this,” they warned. “If you keep it up, the government authorities will make us all leave.”

As a result, Amy was ready to give up. "Lord," she cried, "this burden you've put on my heart for these girls--I can't carry it anymore." Then one day she realized whose burden it really was:

At last a day came when the burden grew too heavy for me; and then it was as though the tamarind trees about the house were not tamarind, but olive, and under one of these trees our Lord Jesus knelt alone. And I knew that this was His burden, not mine. It was He who was asking me to share it with Him, not I who was asking Him to share it with me.

As a wise preacher taught: “All Christian prayer begins at the Right hand of God,” for it begins with Christ’s prayer, Christ’s prayer for us. We join in his prayer when we pray. This means that our prayers will most certainly be heard by the Father, but it also means that, if we are faithful, we will find our prayers more and more be shaped by Jesus’ prayers. And so if we are to live an ascension life, if we have indeed been “lifted up with him,” as Paul says, and invited to experience “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms,” it is an invitation to share with him in all things, in the joys as well as the burdens. But it is also to know that Jesus bears our burdens for us as well as the burdens of others. He prays for us, stands in the gap for us, so that we can stand in the gap for others. What a consolation, what a joy, what a privilege it is for us to have Jesus as our man in heaven. Thanks be to God!