

### Jesus Prays for His Disciples

If Jesus were to stop in this morning, and were to turn his eyes to heaven and to offer a prayer to God on our behalf, what would he pray for? Rain? Don't really need that today, do we? How about a good wheat crop? Healing? Safe travels? An end to the pandemic? World Peace?

The entire 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John is one long prayer. In chapter 13-16, the disciples have been gathered with Jesus in the "upper room." He's been preparing them for his arrest, trial, and death. Preparing them to go on without him. Teaching them everything they will need to know. And he caps everything off by praying for them. In what has come to be known as the "High Priestly Prayer."

It's different from that other most famous prayer in the Bible, the Lord's Prayer. In that prayer he's praying with the disciples. Modeling for them, teaching them how to pray. In John 17 Jesus is praying for his disciples [17:9, "asking on their behalf"]. But what is he praying for? A lot!

But for this morning, I propose that Jesus is praying for essentially four things. Four words that all end with the letters "ion."

First, he prays for their **protection** [17:11, "**Holy Father, protect them**"]. Protection from what? Harm, we would assume. He's praying that the Father will keep his disciples safe from anything that would harm them. What might this be? What would have the power or capability to harm his disciples? Illness, perhaps. Injury. (When we pray for the protection of our loved ones, this is usually what we mean, right? Their health and their safety.)

But let's personify this a bit more. Let's ask not "what" but "who." Who has the power or capability to harm his disciples? Their enemies, right? As we know, the psalmists talk a lot about their enemies. And we can relate, because we all have enemies of various kinds. But who is our #1 enemy? Jesus specifies in 17:15: "**I ask you to protect them from the evil one.**"

Who is that? Is it a person? Is it a sinister power? Is it anything that is counter to God? Anything that opposes God? Is "the evil one" another word for God's enemy, the devil? Like the Hebrew word Satan, or שָׂטָן, which is the name of the ultimate and timeless adversary of God (a word and a name we still use today)?

We could say that the evil one is anyone or anything that destroys good. Anyone or anything that tries to undermine what God is trying to accomplish. Anything or anyone that gets in the way of God's work in the world. Anyone or anything that gets in the way of God's people, as they are trying to carry out God's work in the world.

At the time that the Gospel of John was being written, the followers of Jesus were being persecuted. The good news or "gospel" they were trying to proclaim, the good news of a Resurrected Lord, was being suppressed and silenced.

In our day, what good news or gospel are we trying to proclaim that the evil one is trying to suppress? The gospel of peace, perhaps? The gospel of love between all peoples of the world, whatever their language and skin color? The gospel of forgiveness and grace, amidst a world that wants to judge others, that wants to punish rather than restore. What are we trying to accomplish here at the First Mennonite Church, that the evil one, the Satan, wants to hinder?

In his prayer, Jesus talks a lot about “the world” [show **17:5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24, 25**], in Greek, cosmos. It’s not that the world itself is bad. God created the world, and it was good—in fact, very good. But in his prayer, whenever Jesus mentions “the world, he’s talking about the “sphere of enmity to God.”

So again, in our day, what aspects of the “world” are enemies of God? Those aspects that try to promote hate, rather than love? Those aspects that try to lure us away from worshipping God, by tempting us to worship other idols, like money, or possessions, or glamour, or appearance, or popularity (that is, anything that would seem to make us popular or high esteemed), or politics? Protect them from all of this, Jesus is praying for us. Protect them from the evil one.

Second, Jesus is praying for our **sanctification**, that we would be sanctified. [**17:17, “sanctify them in the truth”**]. What does it mean to be sanctified? That’s not a word we use in our daily vocabulary. It’s one of those religious or “churchy” words. We assume that to be sanctified means to be pure, to be without sin. Spotless. Perfect, even. (Like we talked about last week.)

But also like we talked about last week, to be perfect is impossible. To be spotless, to be pure, to be without sin is impossible. To be sanctified actually means something very different—it means to be set apart. To be designated as holy (which again we sometime think means to be pure or spotless, but that’s not what the word holy means).

We could say that to be sanctified means to be different from the world around us. To act different. To sound different. To look different. This is why the Amish dress simply—so they look different from the world. It’s why Amish men wear their hair and beards differently; why Amish women cover their heads. It’s why Holdeman women and men dress differently today, in our part of Kansas. They believe God wants them to be sanctified, wants them to look different, wants them to be set apart from the world around them.

In what ways do we think God wants us to be set apart, to look and sound and act differently from the world around us? In what ways are we called to be sanctified?

Our brand of Mennonite doesn’t put so much emphasis on appearance. At least, physical appearance. At least, how we dress, and wear our hair. But what we do tend to emphasize is how we live, how we act. (Which when it comes down to it does have to do with how we look or appear.) We believe that God calls us to act differently from the world around us. That this is what it means to be sanctified or set apart. Where the world around us is called to act in hate, we are called to act in love. Where the world around us is called to act in vengeance, we are called to act in love. When the world around us is called to act in fear, we are called to act in love.

It all comes down to love. As the beloved song chorus says, “they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” To be sanctified means to be set apart for love. Jesus is praying that we will be sanctified or set apart for love.

Third, Jesus prays for our **unification**. Which is another way of saying, he prays that we will be **one** [17:21, **“that they may all be one”**]. What does this mean, to be one? Does it mean that we will all look the same? Clearly not. Look around. We all look different. Does it mean that we will all think the same, or believe the same? Clearly not. No two of us have the same mind or heart or soul. We were all created to think differently and uniquely. When we come together for meetings—committee meetings, or congregational meetings—we don’t all think the same. Far from it. Sometimes we even disagree! And apparently, this is as it should

be. We were not created to agree, to think the same. To be unified, to be one, means that we choose to stay together despite our differences and disagreements. That we “hang in there” with one another. That we “abide” with one another, as we talked about last week. (Remember that Greek word *meno*, not as in Menno-nite, but as in “to abide?”)

When Jesus prays that we will be one, just as he and God are one [17:22, “**so that they may be one, as we are one**”], when he asks God that we will “**become completely one**” [17:23], he is praying that we will choose to stay together. To be unified means to be united. Like the beloved song chorus that says, “help us live in unity.” Help us choose one another. Help us choose to stay together, to hang in there. Not because we are all the same. But despite our differences.

Fourth, in his prayer for his disciples, Jesus prays for their **mission**. The writer of the Gospel of John likes the word “send” or “sent.” [17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25.] Which in Latin is *missio*. In his prayer, Jesus says that just as God has sent him onto the world, so Jesus is now sending us. [17:18 - “**As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.**”] Jesus mission and ours is the same. Or rather, our mission is to carry on Jesus’ mission, to carry on Jesus’ work in the world.

How many of you knew that First Mennonite Church as a mission statement? Do you know what it is? It’s on our web site. It’s also on our weekly bulletin. On the front page, right after and just believe the words “First Mennonite Church.” It says, “**In Christ, making disciples through loving relationships.**” That mission statement is unique to us. You prayed about it, and you chose it years ago. Trinity Mennonite Church and Hillsboro MB and Ebenfeld all have their own mission statements. This one is ours.

Jesus is praying for our mission. He’s praying first of all that we will be “In Christ”—in him, united with him, one with him—and that together we will “make disciples” . . . “through loving relationships.” Loving relationships with one another. With our classmates and coworkers. With all those in our community. With all those in the world around us. Again we see that it all comes back to love. “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” They’ll know who sent us by our love. By our example, by our loving relationships, the world will also want to live lives of loving relationships. This is part of what it means to “make disciples.” This is our mission. And Jesus is praying for it.

Jesus is praying—he prays every day—for our **protection** from the evil one. From all those forces, those “enemies of God” who are also our enemies. All those who want to do us harm. All those who oppose, who want to get in the way of our doing Jesus’ and God’s work in the world.

Jesus prays for our **sanctification**. That we will be set apart. That we will look and sound and act differently from the world around us. That we will act in love.

Jesus prays for our **unification**. That we will be one, even as he and the Father are one. Not that we will all be the same—that we will look and think the same, because, after all, God created each one of us different—but that we will choose to stay together despite our differences.

And finally, Jesus prays for our **mission**. Our unique, God-given/granted mission, which in our case is to be “In Christ - making disciples through loving relationships.” But which ultimately it the very same as Christ’s mission in the world. Because after all, just as God sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus is now sending us.

Praise be to God! Amen.