

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“A Prayer Overheard: In Your Name”

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John 17:6-12

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We continue this Lenten walk through Christ’s powerful prayer in the Gospel of John. If you were with us last week, you’ll remember that we are looking at what is in fact the longest example of Jesus praying in Scripture, a prayer he offers at the Last Supper, with his disciples gathered around him. And what does he pray for? Us. His disciples. His followers. In these few moments he has before he is betrayed, tried, and crucified, he lifts-up in prayer those closest to him.

Last week we found that he opened his prayer by praying for his own glory, but really that was another way of saying he was praying for his own death, his self-giving, his sacrifice, and that his followers would know, truly know the one true God. The prayer continues, with Jesus unveiling not just his belief, his trust, his faith in God, in the Father, but also, contrary to what might be indicated otherwise through what he was about to endure, his faith, his trust in us.

Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, John 17:6-12.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Faithful God, we pray for your faithfulness to be with us. We praise you for, though we are fickle, you remain steadfast in your love, protection, and provision for us. Give us hearts and minds to hear your Word this morning, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I’ve got to confess, I can get too casual when it comes to invoking the name of the Almighty, whether in prayer or just in conversation. And it’s a good check in a passage like this that I/we shouldn’t be so cavalier.

In high school, I remember in church youth group there was an older student, a senior who would on occasion lead the group in prayer. (I may have referenced this before in a sermon.) But he would open his prayers not with flowery language, but a simple, “Hey God, how’s it going?” Then what would follow was a simple, almost conversational prayer, sharing how his day went, things he was thankful for, things he was struggling with, people on his mind. Then at the end, he would close with, “Talk to you later. Amen.”

I remember then being struck by how relaxed and intimate it was. All the prayers I had heard had to be—just *had* to be—in this beautiful poetic language, might as well have been iambic pentameter or something. But the sense of connection was jarring, and there was something to be said about that, and the model it gave.

Then again, I catch myself wondering now whether that form of prayer was *too* relaxed, *too* casual, to the point of irreverence. I don’t know what the right answer is, ultimately. It was a good counter to the insecurity of a young person like me at the time who was hesitant at best to open my mouth in prayer audibly. It showed that, no, you really don’t have to be an English major to offer a prayer that was pleasing to the Lord.

But at the same time, was it in keeping with the words of Christ, teaching us to pray, in that very first line, “Our Father, who art in heaven, *hallowed by thy name*” or, in other words, “holy, set apart is your name”?

I go back and forth, honestly. When my prayers feel too stiff, too formulaic, too prone to liturgical language, I’m reminded of “Hey God, how’s it going?” And when my prayers feel too familiar, I’m reminded that in the very act of praying I am presuming to converse with the Almighty, the Alpha and Omega, before whom my knees should rightly bow in worship.

And I think there’s something of that tension at work in this part of Christ’s prayer on our behalf. In the preceding verses, he had already offered prayers for his own glory, which counter to prevailing notions were really a prayer for his own humiliating, excruciating death, a prayer that he would be glorified in the most unglorifying circumstances (unglorifying by our standards at least) and that through that “glory”, his disciples, those who follow him might know eternal life, that is, that they would know the one true God.

In other words, he’s praying that we would know the Lord through the way he reveals himself in giving of his Son in this humiliating way. What does that say about the kind of God this is?

We should keep that in mind when Jesus says in v. 6, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me in the world.”

There’s a lot in a name. That’s just generalizing, but especially true here. There’s a lot in the name of God, and a whole lot just in the premise of making known the name of God—and not just an actual name, but more broadly making known the character of God. It’s a loaded endeavor, because when one presumes to make known the name of God, you are more or less- a) saying you know what the name is, and b) showing that you’re able to declare it in the first place.

And that’s not something that was so simple in Jewish circles.

Our Bible scholars among us will know just from the Old Testament that the “name of God” was a big deal. Just knowing the name of or having the ability to name something or someone implied a degree of familiarity even authority. We see that over and over in Scripture.

And that’s why in the Old Testament, the “name of God” was not something so simply known or made known. Sure there were lots of titles (like “Almighty” or “Creator”), maybe, or just the word used for a deity (a “god”), but it was a big deal when at the burning bush, God discloses to the prophet Moses how Moses should, in a way, “introduce” him: “I AM WHO I AM,” which seems an odd thing for a name to be, but that’s just a possible translation of it. That phrase/name is more often known through the actual letters in Hebrew: YHWH, often rendered as “Yahweh,” the self-given name of God. “This is my name.”

So sacred was the name of God considered that those who would read that passage as well as every other use of that name in Scripture wouldn’t even say it, wouldn’t even say “Yahweh.” They’d say something else, usually “Adonai,” meaning you’d be reading along in a verse, and you come to the name of God being written out YHWH, but instead of saying “Yahweh,” you’d say “Adonai,” because uttering the name of God was considered to be too presumptuous, too familiar.

We even have a nod to it in most translations/editions of the Old Testament. Have you ever noticed in reading the Old Testament that a lot of times when the word “Lord” shows up, it’s in all caps? Or rather, it’s a regular capital “L” and then after that smaller capital letters “-ORD.” Even other words like “God” or “Almighty”

are typed out normally: a capital letter then lower case letters, but not the word “LORD.” Ever noticed that? Ever wondered why? It’s not a translation of a word meaning “lord,” like you’d address a knight or something. It’s the name of God. When you see “the LORD” in the Old Testament, the text is actually saying “YHWH,” “Yahweh,” but saying/writing “LORD” instead of “Yahweh” is a nod toward that tradition that the name of God is something that has been disclosed, but you didn’t say it. You didn’t verbalize it. It was too holy, too mysterious.

And then here comes Jesus, in this prayer, saying “I have made your name known.” It’s a big deal. Take all the mystery, all the holiness that came with the name of God, and this Jesus prays, “I have made that name known, I’ve declared it.” It conveys that Jesus was one who would and could proclaim with all integrity and faithfulness the very name of God on High.

And not just the phonetic name, but the character of God. And what is that character? Well, many things, but in particular it’s what Jesus had just been alluding to, that this God, by this name, gives his Son, gives himself, going to death out of love for us. *That’s* what’s in a name. The Lord gives himself up out of love for you.

But he goes further. In v. 7, “Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 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.” In other words, the substance of Jesus’s declaration, making the name of God known, he has given to his followers, this message, this knowledge, he has made it known to them. “*This* is who God is. *This* is what God is like.” And they received it. They believe it.

Then in v. 9, something of a turn. “I 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. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.” Here’s where this becomes more directly a prayer for his disciples, his followers. A few verses earlier, Jesus had prayed, “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.” Now he’s praying, “I have been glorified in them.” What he means—and it can be easy to lose this as we’re reading through it—what he means is that in a similar way that Jesus has declared and glorified the Father in the task, the mission, the message given to him as the Son of God, so too have his followers been given the task, the mission, the mystery, the message to continue it.

So when Jesus says, “I am asking on their behalf,” he’s praying, “They’ve been given this message, this mission, this mystery. They’ve received it. They believe it. They will continue on with it, glorifying me, making my name known, making your name known.

“But they will need help. They can’t do this on their own. The world is too harsh, and the burden is too great.”

That’s why he then prays, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

He’ll say more about their protection in the next few verses, which Pastor Mark will share more about next Sunday.

But for today, what is it about the name of God, about making known the name of God, making known the character of God that can be so difficult, so trying, that it would warrant protection in the first place?

Because I mean, you go out “in the name of” something or something, that’s supposed to give you some kind of extension of the power of that name, right? When messengers or agents of a king or queen would go out

and say, “I say unto thee in the name of the king,” it was a statement, I’m here on the king’s business. Don’t interfere or do me harm, or it’d be as if you were interfering with the king himself.” “In the name of the king.”

Or even in Jesus’s time, during the Roman Empire, if one was a Roman citizen—which wasn’t quite so easy a thing to become—you were entitled to certain protections and treatments wherever you went. Why? Because the message was, you mess with a Roman citizen, someone out in the name of Rome, in the name of the Emperor, you bring harm to them, the retribution of Rome would be coming for you. That’s protection in a name.

But is that what Jesus means? I’m not so sure. Certainly didn’t look that way. I mean, Jesus declaring the name of God was all wrapped up into his going to his own death, and over and over he would declare that following him meant following into a life of hardship precisely because of his name. Making the name of God known for Jesus meant going to the cross. And following Jesus, continuing in making that name known, meant hardship, and Jesus knew that. So “protection in your name” wasn’t a force field.

But it was assurance they weren’t alone. “That they may be one, as we are one.”

The reasons for hardship for the disciples then looked different, just as embracing and following a faith in Christ in every century, every place has had its own differences too.

We obviously are not faced with the threat of active persecution. We might be thought of as weird in an increasingly skeptical world, but lives and livelihoods are not so in danger as they have been in other times and as they are today in other places.

But what are the burdens of faith for you? Because if your answer is, “You know, it’s been pretty easy to follow Jesus. I don’t really face much friction,” then on one hand, let us give thanks that we do not face active persecution; that’s not nothing. But then on the other, if there’s no point of friction or struggle with the world around us because of how we practice our faith, because of how we declare the name of God, then we might not be doing it right.

Now this doesn’t mean we go out looking to pick a fight and say it was in the name of Jesus, but the very notion of living a life defined by grace, by forgiveness, by care for those around us, by giving and sacrificing ourselves for others, especially for those who are outcast, alienated, impoverished, oppressed, for the least of these, for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant. If there has been no claim upon our lives that the name of God should be made known, that makes following and practicing our belief in that name somewhat challenging, then maybe we’ve missed what the name of God means. Maybe we’ve mistaken bearing witness to the name of God as something we can easily manage on our own, that we don’t really need any help to do so. Maybe our practice and our prayers have become too casual.

Nevertheless, be assured, friends. Be assured that as we are sent out to declare this mystery, this message, that somehow the Eternal God out of love saw fit to give himself for us and that we might in his name give ourselves for others too, we do not do so alone.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.