

It’s hard to read this passage from John’s gospel without feeling a bit guilty. It’s a very intimate moment between Jesus and his heavenly Father, when Jesus prays. Jesus knows, of course, that he is about to die on a Roman cross. That is the backdrop to all that he says and does in these final moments prior to his arrest and trial. And it is what he ironically refers to in his prayer as his “glory.” Imagine. He is about to give up his life, and he calls it his “glory.”

But then again, we wouldn’t know that if we weren’t eavesdropping on his private prayer with God. And that’s where our sense of guilt comes in. It’s as if we are listening in on an intimate conversation between Jesus and his Father, and there’s something in us that tells us we have no right to do that. Our mothers taught us not to eavesdrop on private conversations.

When I was very young, because we lived in the country, our telephone was on what was called a “party line.” Some of you remember those days, don’t you? For the rest of you, you need to know about this if for no other reason than to realize just how far we’ve come with communications. Being on a party line meant we had to share our phone line with other local families. So how did you know when the call was for you? Well, each household had a distinctive ring, not unlike cell phone ring tones today. A long and a short ring, and it was for you. Two long rings and it was for another household, and so on. That’s the way it worked. When the phone rang and you knew from the ring it was for one of the other families on your party line, you weren’t supposed to pick it up. That was the unspoken ethic for folks on a party line.

But if you were a person not so ethically inclined, it was possible to listen in on the private phone conversations of other people. One of our neighbors enjoyed doing just that. You could just tell from the background sounds when she was eavesdropping. Phone calls are one thing, prayer is another. Is there a similar ethic when it comes to eavesdropping on a prayer?

Well, maybe this prayer of Jesus is not meant to be private at all. You see, Jesus is praying about his followers. Notice that he says, “*My prayer is not for them alone,*” referring to his disciples, but also, “*for those who will believe in me through their message...*” (v. 20). Jesus is praying for all the generations of believers who will come to faith through the witness of his disciples. In other words, Jesus is praying for us! So, maybe it’s not so bad

after all that we're listening in on what he has to say, because if he's praying for us, it's good for us to know we're being prayed for.

Not only that, but just a few moments ago we had the Prayers of the People. It was addressed to God, yet all of you listened in, didn't you? And you silently added the prayers of your heart, didn't you? It's kind of like Time with the Children. For any visitors, they discover we have a message designed for the youngest worshipers at our services. Rarely, if ever, would we forego this part of the service. I do it and occasionally others who do it, wearing a microphone. Is that so the children can hear us? Not really. We're sitting right beside them. We wear a microphone so the rest of us can hear. But it's primarily a time *for the children*. Perhaps the gospel is heard best when it is *overheard*.

That is the nature of Jesus' priestly prayer in John 17. He intercedes on behalf of his disciples and allows them to listen in on the conversation he is having with his heavenly Father. Why? Because there is tremendous value in knowing we have been prayed for.

Of course, we already pray for one another in our services of worship. After a period of hospitalization and perhaps rehabilitation to aid in their recovery, people of our congregation will return to worship with us on Sunday morning. When they come back to church I look into their faces, and I am struck by a realization that I may have missed before. They look like people who know they have been prayed for!

In Jesus' prayer there are a number of purpose statements. These statements are worth following so that we can understand what is at stake in our Christian witness, so it is supported through unity. In English, the purpose clauses begin with "*that*" or "*so that*." In verses 20 & 21, Jesus prays, "*that all of them may be one*" (i.e. all who belong to the universal church across time and space), "*so that the world may believe that you have sent me*." In verses 22 & 23, Jesus prays to his Father that he has given us the glory that the Father gave him, "*that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity*."

Our worship services are customarily filled with prayer. A prayer of adoration, a prayer of confession, silent prayers, prayers of the people, the Lord's Prayer and it is common to pray for encouragement, strength, vision and perseverance in response to the word of God. [Even today, we have prayed for Emerson and her family on the occasion of her baptism, for God's keeping, God's guidance, God's protection, and for that day when she confesses Christ as Lord.] All of these prayers have been offered in the name of Jesus to our

heavenly Father. Yet, we have all listened in because not only is there value in knowing we have been prayed for, but prayer by its very nature, especially prayer during worship, what we call intercessory prayer, is communal. It involves the whole faith community—you and me.

I have a theory. Notice that Jesus prays for his disciples, and then, he prays for those who will believe in him through their witness. And what does he ask his Father for, on their behalf? That they be ONE. That there be unity in their hearts. Maybe Jesus asked for this because he knew it would be one of the hardest things for his followers to do...to be ONE in spirit and purpose. There are only eleven of them left. Judas, the betrayer, has gone off to claim his blood money. And even the ones remaining are in a fog as to what Jesus truly wants them to do. They've all got their own ideas; their own personal agendas. Who knows what will happen after Jesus is gone from them? So, Jesus asks his heavenly Father that his followers be ONE in spirit and purpose.

Evidently, he knew how hard it would be for them to be of ONE heart. That's certainly been borne out through Christian history, hasn't it? You've got Catholics; and you've got Baptists. Signs in the front yard of churches dot the landscape that include hundreds of different names. You will find United Methodist and Evangelical Lutheran, Anglican and Orthodox. You've got Church of God, and Assemblies of God, and non-denominational churches.

And even when people claim the same name, it doesn't mean they're on the same page. Do you know how many different Presbyterian denominations there are in North America alone? There are 31 according to Wikipedia! South Korea has over 100 Presbyterian denominations—made up of about 9 million Presbyterians—many more than in the United States. Yet, Jesus prayed that his followers would be ONE.

Taking this into consideration, we might be led to conclude that God decided *not* to answer Jesus' prayer, because oneness apparently is not our strong suit. But let's not blame our divisions on God. The reason we are not ONE is because we're so doggedly stubborn in defending our own ideas about God and faith. E. Stanley Jones, the famous evangelist, notably said, "Talk about WHAT you believe, and you have disunity. Talk about WHO you believe in, and you have unity."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Nazis and hanged just a few days before his camp was liberated by the Allies. Yet he said, "I can no longer condemn or hate other

Christians for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble they cause me. In intercessory prayer the face that may have been strange and intolerable to me is transformed into the face of one for whom Christ died.”

*“My prayer is not for them alone,”* Jesus said. *“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you”* (vv. 20-21). In that prayer, we are privileged to overhear our Lord say, *“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one.”*

If we were to pray like Jesus it will be risky. Because to pray like Jesus is to pray for what God wants. And what God wants may not only be different from what we want, but it might run completely counter to our personal wishes. Remember that despite the best prayers of Jesus, he still died on a cross. To pray like Jesus is risky. Nevertheless, now that we know how Jesus prayed, we must ask to be made ONE in spirit and in purpose. And if God, in his sovereign mercy and grace, chooses to hear our prayer and grant it, think of the possibilities that would come our way.

Let’s pray together: *Lord, make us one. Not that all of us have to believe the same all the time, but that all of us believe in YOU all the time. In Jesus’ name we ask it, Amen.*

(Thanks to Dr. Randy Hyde for sermon ideas)