

## **“Offering Ourselves”**

**John 17:1-11**

**Sunday, May 21, 2023**

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*Jesus prays for the disciples, calling them into the world, and pleading for their unity.*

As often happens at conferences, especially clergy conferences, some of the most interesting conversations after hours. Sometimes these involve beverages. Now imagine over one thousand preachers and professors gathered for a week-long conference focused on “Hope for a Weary World.” I know, it sounds absolutely scintillating, doesn’t it? On one evening about 400 of us were jammed into a room at a microbrewery for a live taping of a popular podcast called “Homebrewed Christianity.” The host, Tripp Fuller, gathered three of his friends for a conversation on a wide-ranging free-wheeling conversation about theology. You didn’t know pastors could be so wild, did you?

But toward the end, Fuller looked at his guests and asked, “Why are you not an atheist?” One of them, a seminary professor and author snapped back, “What makes you so sure I’m not?” But then another professor said, “I am not an atheist because at age 15 I was diagnosed with a life-threatening cancer and had both legs amputated. When my parents brought me home, church people filled our refrigerator with what we in Minnesota call ‘hot dish.’ I was surrounded in prayer and I knew it. That changed my life.”

Prayer changes things. I learned that one hot summer day when I was 11 or 12. I flew into the house after VBS and ran straight into my room. Unlike the students who come to our VBS, I was a rather reluctant VBSer. To me it felt a lot like going to church five days a week in the middle of summer, which of course it was. Unlike the kids who attend our VBS, I really was never much of a fan. But then our VBS has a certain cool factor that was pretty much lacking when I was a kid. That is pretty much baked into the DNA of Woodlawn’s VBS. Back in the day, the most creative part of VBS was wondering whether we would have red or blue Kool Aid to drink. Each day started with singing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Despite what the hymn says, we were only allowed to march in place. Some sort of story usually on a flannel board or film strip followed. Most of my friends and I tolerated it all the way you tolerate the mild side effects of medicine.

But as my mother reminded me, I was not in control of my summer schedule so I had no choice. But one year, our house was not a democracy and I had no choice. But

something happened one day that changed my life. Our pastor, who remains a beloved friend, handed out copies of the New Testament, and then our teacher gave us a plaque that read, “Prayer Changes Things.” It was as if someone had handed me a copy of the Guttenberg Bible and an original framed Rembrandt. The plaque went on my bookcase and the Bible stayed on my nightstand.

The image of those two clasped hands and gold-tinted writing changed me. Prayer changed me.

Prayer indeed changes things. I wonder if you might take a moment this morning and use the 3X5 cards to write down a memory or a brief word or two about how prayer has changed you. When was a time that the prayers of others changed you? Or perhaps you remember a time when you prayed, as many of us have, and nothing changed, no answer arrived. But you still felt surrounded by God’s presence. Prayer changes things.

If surveys can be trusted, about 79 percent of people pray either regularly or at least semi-regularly. <sup>1</sup> What makes this interesting is that only a third of Americans of all religious backgrounds attend church routinely, and that only 53 percent of persons who believe religion is important. That number has continued to shrink every year. <sup>2</sup>

So, what, exactly, does prayer change? Prayer, said John Calvin, is the way we dig up “the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord’s gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.” It is, he said, the primary exercise of faith, by which “our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire to seek, love, and serve (God).”

Too often prayer becomes reduced to cliches or to casual commitments that lack the power we see in Jesus’ prayers. Our prayers become reduced down to a bland and empty ritual. “You’re in our thoughts and prayers” once was a meaningful statement of support. But now it sounds empty and weak, as if we are sticking our heads in the sand. It’s almost meaningless. There is nothing wrong with offering thoughts and prayers, of course, but it has become an empty, mindless, automatic response-- similar to saying “God bless you” when someone sneezes.

Prayer, as the Bible describes it, is not magic. Prayer joins us to Christ and to each other. Prayer puts our faith to work, as Joan Gray has written, connecting us to God, opening our lives to God’s presence and purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.barna.com/research/silent-solo-americans-pray/>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/importance-of-religion-in-ones-life/>

This week, our neighbor's son, a young man who went to school with our kids, was hit by a car while coming home from work. He was riding a motorcycle at Big Bend and Sulphur when a car hit him, immediately severing one of his legs. What can we say, how do we respond? We pray, but then we respond.

For 453 days, people in the Ukraine have been praying for peace. I suspect there are families in Russia who pray for that as well. We pray, but we also respond in acts of humanitarian support.

For a week, members of our church prayed with those living in the marginal spaces of life. They prayed, but they also went to work, joining hands and hearts.

Faced with grim diagnoses or looming family problems, we pray, because prayer changes things.

John tells us, Jesus prays as well. He's not off by himself, alone on a mountaintop. He's gathered with his friends. This prayer is not the Lord's Prayer we see in the other gospels. It is, instead, a prayer that follows an evening where Jesus has washed their feet, welcomed his betrayer, told them he was going to die, and commanded them to love one another.

He is praying for them, which is simply astonishing.

He prays that they may glimpse the glory of God in what lies ahead. Jesus understands that God's glory is not just a blaze of light or fancy pyrotechnics. It is, instead, the glory of God's love poured out the world, healing, restoring, renewing. It is a glory made real in acts of suffering, service, and love. It is the sort of glory that unites the disciples to God and to each other.

These are Jesus' thoughts and prayers, and by now it is clear that his thoughts are rarely our thoughts, his prayers not our prayers.

We barely know what it means to find that sort of unity anymore. Michael Curry, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal church, reminds us that the unity God offers does not mean we will always agree with each other, but instead will be united in a love that attests to the hope of resurrection. That is our hope, our unity.

Such unity is neither comfortable nor easy. There are lots of reasons to avoid unity, writes Jamie Clark-Soles. They include competition, or a belief in a theology of scarcity rather than abundance, or we think we are too busy to be in other people's lives. Truth be told, it is hard, it is messy, and we won't always get it right. But Jesus' prayer is that

we will do greater works than he did, and perhaps that includes believing in the possibility of life in community.

Jesus prays that we might become an offering, to each other, to our neighbors, to our world.

He is praying for us, and that is astonishing. He prays that we might know that eternal life is not just something waiting for us when we die, but a life grounded in God's hope and abundance today. That is the life we offer to others.

When Carol's mother died five years ago, one of the first responses from her grandchildren, our children, was "But who will pray for us now?" Jackie was known for her lengthy prayer lists, and her deep belief that indeed prayer changes things. For her grandchildren, this prayer was simply astonishing—that even as they grew, listening to music Grandma did not enjoy, choosing clothes she might not have purchased, even adding piercings and tattoos which she would definitely not have approved, she continued to pray.

It is humbling to be told that someone is praying for you, which is why Jesus' words are so important. He is praying for you and for the church. He does not ask that they be successful. He does not ask that our lives be necessarily comfortable or easy, or that we are given a pass from hardships. He asks that God protect us so that the fragile bonds of unity may be strengthened.

"Praying for freedom never did me any good," said Frederick Douglass, "until I prayed with my feet." Generations later, Rabbi Abraham Heschel said something like that following the 1965 March to Selma, AL. "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>See: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/25820.3?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>