

“Pray for Me, Jesus”

Neil Engle
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Text: John 17:6-19

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

When growing up I always enjoyed visiting Grandma Engle in Madison. Grandpa died when I was ten, so it was Grandma with whom I was best acquainted. She was the one that sent us birthday money – a dollar for every year in age. She was the one who let us eat ice cream in front of the TV; who could make us think we were having fun popping green beans or cracking walnuts; who let us make our glass of Tang as strong and sweet as we wanted. I could always count on Grandma to put in a good word for me anytime she could. A good word and support would be expressed to my parents when I was in trouble, or to a friend of hers when I wasn't. You could depend on Grandma to brag on you when no one else dared say anything positive about you. Who loved you so that no matter what anyone said of you, they spoke well of you?

Who was it for you? Who would come to your defense? A relative, a best friend, a teacher or coach? Who cared for you when the world turned its eyes from you?

When Jesus was preparing for His cross, the world was turning away its eyes. Not only preparing Himself, Jesus was preparing His disciples too. Our scripture selection from the gospel of John comes at the end of the farewell material – chapters 14-17. Jesus gives His farewell address, soon to be lifted up on a cross. The disciples are with Him, and now as Jesus turns to have prayer, the disciples still are not far off. In fact, His friends are close enough to overhear. He is preparing for something and preparing them for something. He talks about going to a place where they cannot follow – at least for now. And that kind of talk has them scared. Some of them have been traveling with Jesus from the very start, almost three years now. Shuffling from town to town on dusty roads, sometimes in the heat and sometimes in the cold not knowing who they would meet and what they would face has brought them close to Jesus. Some days were filled with glorious crowds, all calling out for Jesus.

The disciples felt so important. Maybe they really were a part of something big, something life-changing. Then there were the days when no one was sure where their next meal would come from and whether they would have a place to sleep that night or, worse yet, whether or not they'd be thrown out of town. But they kept following Jesus. They kept with Him. Because most of all, they loved their teacher. So it's no surprise that the disciples would be moved as they overheard Jesus praying to God. Yes, it was a private time but the disciples couldn't help but “listen in.” In overhearing such a private conversation with God, the disciples began to realize just how much they meant to Jesus.

Ever had the experience of someone praying for you? Do you recall how moving and powerful that can be, to have someone speak your name in a prayer? Maybe it was just you and a friend praying at the kitchen table over a cup of coffee – maybe you and your spouse or you and your children. Perhaps you were part of a Spiritual Life group and joined hands to close one of your meetings in prayer and had someone speak your name. Perhaps someone prayed for you while you were in the hospital. Perhaps you've had an occasion to be put on a prayer chain. You know what strength and power and comfort comes from knowing that someone else is remembering you and naming your name in their prayers.

Have you overheard the prayers of the dying? Have you been invited into their deepest thoughts? The dying have a profound wisdom to the future and to the needs of the loved ones left behind. Some of you I know have experienced that.

A pastor made a home visit to a man just given the news he'd likely die of cancer. “Pastor, I know it won't be long before I start feeling sick, so I went to the bank, then to my life insurance agent – made sure everything is in good order – then I went to the local car dealer. I want her to have a dependable car.” He was speaking of his wife. “I want her to be okay when I'm gone.” There was also in that community a young child dying. As she lay in her hospital bed, she looked up at Mom and Dad and said, “You'll be okay without me, won't you? Cause I'll be okay, Jesus will take good care of me.” Promise me, Mommy and Daddy, that you'll be okay. I worry about you.” The dying sometimes do a lot of praying for their loved ones left behind.

Jesus prays for His loved ones. Jesus prays for His disciples, “Father, take care of them . . . I'm praying for them, I'm not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.” Such love Jesus has for His followers. They have been through thick and thin with Him and Jesus loves them.

“Take care of them,” He says to God, “I’m coming home to you soon, Father.”

And Jesus ascended into the clouds after being resurrected, and no doubt said to God, “Remember, take care of them, my loved ones.” Jesus, the Christ, prays on behalf of the disciples and He still does. Christ is praying for you and for me. Hear Him saying, “God, take care of them,” and He is talking about us. The love Jesus has for us is more than we will ever know, and we are fortunate enough to overhear His prayers. In a story David Buttrick tells, there is a scene in which a boy overhears his father praying, and not only praying, but praying for him. All through life and even after his father was gone, he remembered the moment when he overheard his father praying for him.

When we hear Jesus praying for us, I believe it’s important that we overhear a couple of things. First, that we are called out of the world by God. Jesus looks upon His disciples as a gift from God – those, as Jesus prays, “Whom you gave me from the world.” We who claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ must never forget whence we have come and who it is that calls us.

We are called out of the world – but only to be sent back into the world as Christ’s disciples. We’re not called out of the world to be isolated hermits, or try to be part of some utopian commune, but to be participants in the real world of suffering, sorrowing, sinning humanity. That’s the world in which we work and play, live and die. That’s the struggling world to which we must relate, the world in which we are called to be Christ’s witnesses, the world for which He died.

We want to be in the world, yes, but not of it. With too many of us, it’s the other way around – we’re of the world, but not in it! We have embraced the world’s standards of morality, accepted the world’s values, adopted the world’s life-style, acknowledged the world’s measure of success, saluted the world’s goals and objectives. Jesus says His disciples will be hated because they are not of the world. Who in our corner of the world is being persecuted for their faith today?

Jesus speaks about the glory which He has given his disciples. Why in the world doesn’t it show in us? Jesus declares that He has given us His word. What in the world have we done with it? Jesus prays that we may be perfectly one. Where in the world is the church demonstrating its unity today? Jesus speaks about God’s love being in us. How in the world are we expressing that love? In a word, are we any different really, really, from the rest of the world around us? Does it show?

We can say we love Christ with a smile on our face.
We can tell everybody we know.
We can tell our faith stories all over the place,
but the question remains, “Does it show?”
We can put it on buttons and bumpers of cars,
and even on billboards for dough.
We can sing it in churches and shout it in bars,
but the question remains, “Does it show?”
For actions speak louder than words, as they say,
and faith without works will not grow.
Salvation by grace through faith is the way,
but the question remains, “DOES IT SHOW?”

Is our faith in Christ evident to others? Are we effective witnesses, or are we too much like the rest of the world to make any real impact on those around us. In this prayer, Jesus gives us our mission statement – to be in the world but not of it. Called by God as a unique group apart from the rest of the world, to be nourished and equipped to go back into that same world as Christ’s faithful witnesses. Wherever and whatever the need may be, there must we be, ministering to the world – in the world – in His name.

In the gospel of John, we are allowed to overhear Jesus praying for us. We can be surprised by His confidence in us – “They have kept your word . . . they know in truth . . . they have believed.” We are moved by His concern for us. In our discipleship we must never forget that we have been prayed for by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is now glorified. Who loves you and me, no matter what we say or do? Who loves you no matter what the world says of you? None other than the Christ, who continues to pray for you and loves you still.

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