

John 17:1-11

"The Lord's Prayer" is a name well known in Christian churches as referring to the prayer Jesus taught his disciples which begins "Our Father, which art in heaven." It's in Matthew's Gospel as part of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." Many of us learned it as children. We pray it every worship service here at Maple Grove.

However, people outside the church, and even some church-goers, don't know "The Lord's Prayer." I heard about a Methodist who bet a Presbyterian he couldn't recite it. The Methodist said, "I'll give you five dollars if you can say the Lord's Prayer." The Presbyterian confidently began, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." The Methodist remorsefully replied, "OK, here's the five dollars. I didn't think you could do it!"

What many may not know is there is another "Lord's Prayer." Technically, the prayer from Matthew is the "Disciples' Prayer," a prayer for the followers of Jesus to pray. The words of the prayer Jesus, our Lord, prayed himself to God is found in John's Gospel, the seventeenth chapter, parts of which we read together today.

This "Other Lord's Prayer" comes at the end of what is called "The Last Discourse," Jesus' farewell address at The Last Supper. Jesus was praying for the disciples to be prepared for life in the world without him. He would be gone from them soon. He could foresee his death, resurrection, and ascension to return to God. So, first, he instructed them and then, he prayed for them.

We hear him praying for the disciples, but that's not all. In verse 20 he says, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message" – that's you and me! This prayer takes on a special importance when we realize it comes at that most critical point in Jesus' life when he realizes this is the last opportunity he has to be with his friends. He will go from this place to die.

I can't think of any more highly charged situation than that. It's one of those events in which emotions enliven the senses to make impressions permanent. We say of certain events: "I will never forget this." In moments like that simple words such as "goodbye" or "thank you" have a special meaning and come from the heart. It's like what many of our high school and college graduates are experiencing now as they transition to the next stage of their lives.

So what does Jesus pray for us in this personal, emotion-filled time? There are several things mentioned in the prayer, but the two I want to lift up today are his requests:

for God's power to keep us in this world, yet apart from the evil in this world, and for God's spirit to unite us to make a viable witness in this world. If they are important enough for Jesus to pray about, I believe they're important enough for us to consider seriously today.

In verse 15 Jesus says, "My prayer is **not** that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." It's pretty obvious we are "in the world," so this refers to more than our physical location. Jesus believed faith is what happens **IN** the real world, but as Christianity grew, that truth eroded away.

Then, 400 years ago, during the religious revolution called The Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther protested against the system which said if you were

really serious about being a Christian, you got out of the world and into a monastery or a nunnery. Luther said you could be Christian in secular life just as well as you could in a religious setting. In fact, Christians were supposed to make their secular employment a religious vocation. That’s still true today.

Unfortunately, in many people's minds, Christian faith is what happens only inside a church building. But Jesus’ prayer reminds us what goes on here in Church is to prepare us to go out into the world—and make a difference there, to change it for the better.

That means Christians must be a little different than other people, held to a higher standard.

They will be different in their sexual morality.

They will be different in their business and school ethics.

They will be different in matters of peace and justice.

They will be different in their relationships.

Christians look to God’s Word, the Bible, and to the Holy Spirit for guidance to make and meet those standards.

Now if you think that’s easy, you haven’t tried it! If you’ve tried it, you know there is a spiritual warfare going on in this world. That’s why Jesus prayed specifically that we be protected from the “evil one.”

Most of us don't take evil seriously. We rightfully reject the human image of the devil tiptoeing around in a red suit with horns sticking out of his head carrying a pitchfork. But Jesus’ prayer does acknowledge there **IS** a power in this world that draws out the worst in people and situations. Sometimes that power takes dramatic forms as in addiction, violence, or hatefulness.

But for most of us, it comes in the form of various temptations to be less than what we know God wants us to be and to compromise our integrity. Evil can gradually harden our hearts until we move from faithfulness to hopelessness. Pretty soon we stop following Christ and we just follow along with the crowd. We worry about that when our young people graduate and leave home, but the truth is, it can happen to any of us—at any age.

In fact, Satan, the personification of evil, is often called “The Great Deceiver” or “The Father of Lies.” We can easily be blinded to the truth when dealing with temptation. That's precisely how the Bible describes the corruption of the disciples on Good Friday when they deserted Jesus. They didn't become “bad” men. They became “ordinary” men once again. They joined the world. In the colorful language of the Bible it says they “fell captive to the evil one.” They gave in to the lie that the cost of following Jesus was too high and a hopeless cause. Then, they just gave up.

I learned a helpful lesson in dealing with temptation and obedience from our dog, Cinder, a black Pomapoo. She was 10 1/2 pounds of bark. She’s gone now, but one of our favorite tricks with her was to put some tasty morsel on the floor near her and say, “No!” Cinder knew she couldn’t touch it until given permission. The interesting thing was she didn’t look at the food; as if the temptation to disobey would be too great. She steadily looked at her master’s face waiting for the command: “OK, Cinder, go!”

Isn't that what we should do: look to our Master, Jesus, for his direction? In the book of James we read “Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” (James 4:7-8) Evil in all its many forms is a reality and we can't deal with it in our own strength and wisdom. That's why Jesus prayed for God's Spirit to empower us as we live in this world. Power is available; we just have to choose to embrace it, not just once, but on an on-going basis! Of course, we can be forgiven for our mistakes and bad choices, but isn't it better to avoid the trouble—and the consequences—in the first place.

The second request Jesus made to God on our behalf was that believers be united. He prays we may be one as Jesus and the Father are one. Why? So the world may know God and God's love. What is the opposite of unity? Separation. If there is any major work of evil in this world it is to bring separation between families, friends, nations, and especially believers.

Christian unity doesn't have a high priority today. I think the reason is because in America individualism is so highly prized. Many want religion to emphasize making individuals happy, or successful, or peaceful. One of the characters in the "Doonesbury" comic strip observed, "America has changed from a country that wants to do good, to a country that wants to feel good." That has now also become a goal of some churches in America.

I guess it all depends on what analogy we use for the Church. If we see the Church as only a gas station where we go once a week to get spiritual fuel to keep going for the rest of the week, then division among the churches doesn't make any difference. But if the Church is like an army with different outposts all sharing the same mission to fight evil in this world, then to be divided is to undermine the mission.

Jesus prayed “that we might all be one” so as believers we can be the yeast in the dough, the lamp set on the hill, the catalyst for good things happening in this world. John Wesley preached about this oneness when he said, “In essentials, **unity**; in non-essentials, **liberty**, and in all things, **charity**.” We United Methodists are still struggling to determine how to live that out in today's world.

But all Christians can find ways of expressing unity in unexpected places and situations. A story in “Our Daily Bread” devotional magazine tells of a young Russian woman who had been sent to a hospital in Japan for a rare, life-saving procedure. After she arrived she was so afraid she couldn't stop crying. No one spoke Russian so they decided to call an American missionary in their town to see if he could help her. The missionary came to the hospital and tried to comfort her, but he didn't know Russian either. However, when the patient saw his Bible and the communion wafers and juice he had brought with him, she smiled and nodded approval. Then, with no verbal communication at all, this American man and Russian woman shared a common bond in Christ, Holy Communion, and she was strengthened and encouraged.

When we share communion we celebrate God's grace and our oneness in Christ—and we remember.

We remember Christ's death that brought forgiveness and new life for each believer, regardless of age, race, nationality, financial status, or church affiliation.

We remember Christ’s commissioning words to us to share his love with those who are next door and around the world.

We remember the power of God that overcame the evil of the crucifixion and created the glory of the resurrection.

We remember our own promises to be faithful and one in Christ.

We remember because Jesus remembered—to pray for us.