

The last time I saw my Father before he died we were talking late at night. I think my being in seminary gave him freedom to talk about religious things which were not a common topic in our household. Anyway, we began to talk about prayer and he said, he'd only felt that he had a really good connection with God a couple of times. I asked him what he had been praying about. "You kids." He replied without hesitation.

I left the next day and he died within a week. That little window into his prayer life was the greatest legacy he could have left me. My nightly prayers as a child were routine – Now I lay me down to sleep. Those two words, "You kids" were the most loving and personal thing my father ever said to me. Had he not been moving toward the end of his life, I'm not sure we would have had that conversation. We've heard Jesus pray a few times – the one that sticks with me and maybe you - is his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his arrest. Jesus wants his disciples with him but when he prays, he goes a distance from them to pray in private.

And he prays for himself. Asking God to take 'this cup' from him – asking God if the agony and injustice that awaits him might be stopped. He asks this twice in prayer that night and gets his answer when soldiers arrive to arrest him.

That's probably not a bad thing to remember when we doubt God's existence because our prayers were not answered. Jesus shows us from the beginning that a loving God does not always 'answer' our prayers as we would have them answered.

Yet, like Jesus, many of our prayers desire a specific outcome – a successful surgery, relief from an illness, safety in travel, sanity in choices. Unlike us, well maybe just unlike me, Jesus offers his prayers with the acknowledgement that God may have other ideas, another perspective, that God may be God.

This long prayer that Andy and Maria read for us is unusual. Instead of moving apart from the disciples to pray, he stays among them while he prays, prays for them. In his prayer Jesus reveals his love and concern for them; he reports to God that he, Jesus, has done what he was sent to do. That he is leaving them with the knowledge of eternal life – not the afterlife – remember Jesus is still alive at this point. Eternal life is the knowledge of God through the person of Jesus. Knowledge, visceral and tangible, knowledge that can only come from experience and interaction. This is not a throwaway line – this is a description of a union. Jesus lives inside them now. God is known to them now. And, in saying this, Jesus lifts up the fact that the disciples have fulfilled his hopes for them. He asks God to guard and protect them as they continue Jesus' work of showing who God is.

What, I wonder, was the demeanor of the disciples. Hearing Jesus speak these words to God, did they look at each other with astonishment? Did they keep their heads bowed unwilling to meet the glance of another? Were there tears? Was there surprise? Imagine sitting in a group around Jesus and hearing him pray for you. How many of us have encountered Jesus as a judge, as one who delivers criticism or correction? How few of us know this prayer, know this Jesus?

But here they are, the disciples, perhaps so close their folded legs touch each other, there they are within earshot of Jesus' words, there they were within Jesus' energy field – this was no rote prayer – this came from his heart. They were enveloped by Jesus' love, Jesus the real person, Jesus the man. Jesus inhabiting his humanity while effecting his divinity.

Prayers have been flying around us these days like a spell from Harry Potter's wand, well maybe Hermione's. The pandemic has given us much to pray about – death, separation, sickness, uncertainty, inequality. Despite being under house arrest, this has felt like a frantic, busy time. Seeing the progress of the virus in our state, across the country and around the world has absorbed us. We have been developing new routines and devising new strategies to keep our lives running. We have responded in concrete ways. But now, like the disciples who hearing of his departure in his prayer, believe, perhaps for the first time, that they are going to be on their own, we are moving into another time, another manifestation of the pandemic.

We have been told a lot about what we might encounter once we begin to 'open up'. Economists are talking about deep financial consequences; the medical world is talking about re-surgence of the virus. What will tomorrow look like? The usual experts admit to not knowing.

This is a time for prayer. We are approaching the unknown. But what might we pray for? A miracle economic rebound? A huge drop in Covid-19 cases? A vaccine? A five minute test that cost \$1.00?

These are more a wish list than a prayer. This is a time for prayer – prayer as Jesus prays for the disciples. The hardest kind of prayer - a surrendering to God, putting ourselves in God's hands as Jesus did that day.

As Jesus did in the Garden; surrender to God in the hazy, unknown future – this surrender is the heart of prayer. Even as we continue to hold our loved ones before God in prayer, we must also acknowledge that we can't name the needs of an unknown future. What we can do is to trust God in prayer as Jesus did: bringing God into focus in our fear; picking God's voice out from among all those reverberating in our heads. Remembering who walks beside us, remembering who can uphold us not demanding the destination or the outcome.

In his prayer, Jesus invokes God's protection on those the disciples will touch, and those who will be touched by the second generation, those who will be touched by God through the person of Jesus Christ up to the year 2020 and beyond. Jesus asks God to guard us, we who have inherited Eternal Life, here and now.

This prayer is not the most straight forward to digest. The lectionary actually breaks it up in 3 smaller parts and places each part in a different lectionary year. I wanted us to hear it all together to see our story in Jesus', in the disciples. And I wanted us to realize that Jesus laid the disciples (then and now) in God's hands. That as much as Jesus' prayer shows his love for us, it shows his trust in God. Who else is Jesus to turn to at that moment? His whole ministry has been about seeing not through the eyes of the world – the governments, and institutions,

not through the powers and principalities. It is at this transitional moment that Jesus relinquishes his beloveds to the one who is only love. Jesus' prayer is not a veiled set of instructions for the disciples to overhear. It is an exhibition of his love for the disciples and an encouragement that even in the face of what seems like tragedy they will be held by an even greater love. This is what the disciples hear, literally from Jesus' mouth to God's ear. Who else are we to turn to at this moment? A moment we can't even describe. There is no more fierce advocate for us as for his disciples that day. And there was never a time more suited to surrender.

If you were in Jesus' presence, since you are in Jesus' presence, know, KNOW, KNOW – that Jesus is praying for you and desiring that you overhear it, even though you fear it, going into the unknown, putting yourself in God's hands. But there is nothing to fear, you are already there, let them hold you tightly as we face the future. AMEN

Preached on May 24, 2020 by Rev. Judy Arnold