

John 17:1-11
May 4, 2008

South Plains
7th Sunday in Easter

A Prayer for South Plains

It's been a long time since I read John Irving's novel, A Prayer for Owen Meany; and I do not remember anything about the prayer itself. What I do remember is that Owen Meany was something of a misfit. He was not the most popular or the most skillful person. He was, however, worthy of being remembered in prayer because he sacrificed his life to save the lives of others. The novel tells us why a prayer is said for Owen Meany. The seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel tells us why Jesus prays for us and how Jesus prays for us, the why and how of prayers for South Plains Church.

The prayer in John 17 is overheard first by the disciples gathered with Jesus in the upper room on the night he would be betrayed and arrested. Second, the prayer is overheard by the disciples who read this gospel today, you and me. When I was a boy, my brother and I often fought with each other. One day my mother lost patience with her own parenting, and she intervened by trying to pray for peace in the family at the very moment we were fighting. Interesting things happen when we overhear someone else praying for you.

At first there comes a momentary awkwardness. We ask ourselves, "Do I really need prayer? Is my life so out of control that God needs to intervene?" I suspect

that thought occurred to the disciples listening to Jesus' prayer. He is praying primarily for their protection. They were surely nervous about being in Jerusalem with the Passover crowds since the Jewish religious leaders were so angry at Jesus. But, as long as the disciples were with Jesus they felt themselves safe. After all, he was a miracle worker. The common people loved him. On several occasions the gospels tell us that his opponents tried to stone Jesus or throw him out of town, but he always escaped. What the disciples did not know was that this time would be different. This time Jesus would be willing to be arrested, and his followers would run away. This prayer alerts the disciples to danger. They will need God's help.

So, Jesus prays to his heavenly Father, "protect them in your name." I'm reminded of Moses arguing with God about protecting the children of Israel from hunger and thirst in the wilderness. Moses reminds the Lord that Israel is known as the Lord's chosen people. If the Lord does not protect them, it will be the Lord's name that is dishonored. "You gave these disciples to me, Lord," says Jesus. "You need to protect them."

That's the prayer Jesus is making today for you and me. We may not understand why or how, but God's providence has brought us to join the disciples of Jesus Christ. If you are baptized, you have been marked as a Christian. If you attend this church or another church, you are part of the worshiping community called God's people. If you just wandered in today, I believe the Spirit

of God brought you here. It really doesn't matter to Jesus who is here. He is praying for everyone God has given him.

What kind of protection do we need as individuals and as South Plains Presbyterian Church? We always want to be kept safe from the routine disasters we read about: storms like the one that hit Suffolk last week; accidents on the highways and in the air; terrorism, disease and all the natural and unnatural terrors causing loss or pain.

Just as important to the church is God's protection from the tragedies caused by human ineptitude and meanness. I'm thinking of the misunderstandings that can arise in any group when we fail to take the time to explain ourselves. I'm thinking of protection from the anger that we don't always manage well. We get angry and nurse resentments instead of taking responsibility for our anger, and going to the person we're angry with. There's a world of difference between saying, "You make me angry," as though someone else has that power over us, as opposed to saying, "I got angry when you said ...whatever." The first response blames someone else for our feelings. The second opens the possibility that either of us might change in the way we relate.

Jesus prays that God will protect his followers "so that they may be one, as we are one (17:11)." Much of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of John is concerned to convince the disciples that God has given him that he is

indeed one with the Father. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (14:9)," he tells Philip in chapter fourteen. Now, he is saying that the same closeness he enjoys with God is the closeness we can enjoy with each other. That's a high standard for Christian fellowship. It's certainly more than eating an occasional brunch and shaking hands on Sunday morning. This kind of fellowship goes to prayer, and embodies love in service. This kind of fellowship goes beyond treating others as we want to be treated. This fellowship treats others with love in the confidence that we will be met with love.

After the awkwardness of hearing someone pray for us, we can bask for a few moments in the warm glow of attention. There is an authenticity to overhearing something good said about us. If I say to Stuart, "Stuart, you're looking good today," he will appreciate the compliment on the surface. But, he may also wonder, "Don't I look good every day? What does David want from me?" On the other hand, if Stuart overhears me telling someone else, "Stuart looks good today," that carries a different kind of sincerity. I've involved someone else in my praise.

Jesus praises his disciples before God. "They have kept your word," he tells his Father. "They know that everything you have given me is from you (17:6 and 7)," he says. Those compliments are stretching the truth because Jesus' disciples then and now do not always keep God's word and often are ignorant about God's gifts. Here's what I think is happening, and I'm not by

myself in this. Jesus is viewing the potential church of his disciples and the historic church of the future from the perspective of God's time. He begins his prayer with the words, "Father, the hour has come (17:1)." In other words, the moment of salvation is already here. The kingdom of God breaks into and breaks apart all the kingdoms of this world with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent (17:3)."

From the perspective of heaven, the events of our salvation are already in motion, irreversibly moving forward to accomplish heaven's purpose. Because of the salvation Christ accomplishes, God looks at us and sees the obedience of Jesus. God looks at us and sees disciples who know the good news just as Jesus has proclaimed the good news. Jesus' praise for his disciples is the confidence of one who knows the war is over even though a few battles are yet to be fought.

In the church, one result of overhearing a prayer is the knowledge that not just one, but at least two people have joined the prayer. Jesus is leading the upper room in prayer. He is giving voice to wishes and desires his disciples need to join. That's what we hope is happening in this sanctuary when we pray. We trust that the prayers of one person are joined by the prayers, spoken and unspoken, of many persons. I trust that my words of prayer, even when they are poorly chosen, can be used

by the Spirit of Christ to shape all our prayers around the purposes of God.

When we pray, we gather the resources of heaven and earth for God's purposes. Let us pray.