

John 17

17 When Jesus finished saying these things, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, so that the Son can glorify you. 2 You gave him authority over everyone so that he could give eternal life to everyone you gave him. 3 This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent. 4 I have glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. 5 Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I shared with you before the world was created.

6 “I have revealed your name to the people you gave me from this world. They were yours and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. 8 This is because I gave them the words that you gave me, and they received them. They truly understood that I came from you, and they believed that you sent

me.

9 “I’m praying for them. I’m not praying for the world but for those you gave me, because they are yours. 10 Everything that is mine is yours and everything that is yours is mine; I have been glorified in them. 11 I’m no longer in the world, but they are in the world, even as I’m coming to you. Holy Father, watch over them in your name, the name you gave me, that they will be one just as we are one.

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer:
Amen.

There's a story about an office building, a skyscraper that housed a hugely influential international company. Like many successful organizations, they did their business well, but they also tried to cut corners to increase profit margins. One place where

they did this was toilet paper. For every bathroom - except for the executive suites - they purchased single ply toilet paper, which you might know has the same rating and effectiveness for the job as number 2 sandpaper. The employees would complain to almost everyone who would listen. But their peers couldn't make that change. Middle management couldn't make that change. Even the janitor couldn't make that change. Yet, everyone was afraid to complain to the CEO because, well, they weren't sure their job was worth that level of comfort.

That all changed one day when the CEO visited their floors. You see, she wanted to increase productivity, so she met with many different people, and as you might have guessed, she needed to use the bathroom during this jaunt. After her meetings, she took what she heard and experienced to heart, so to boost morale, not only were salaries and benefits raised, but they increased creature comforts in the break rooms and other facilities.

Lo and behold, they even got remarkably soft, 3 ply toilet paper.

The logic behind it all? Invest in the people who do most of the work for the organization, the leaders who contact most of the people you want to influence, and you'll have a more successful company. Not to mention a more comfortable visit to the bathroom. As a general principle, we might say that, if you want to change the world, work through the people that live in and have influence in the world.

That's what we find Jesus doing today. Jesus prays for the next generation that follows him, those who will have the most direct impact on the spread of the Gospel. Jesus prays not generically for the world and it's good, but specifically for those who bring the good word of salvation to the world. Jesus focuses intentionally for those who stand to make the most impact in the daily experience of all God's creation. And Jesus shoots a lot higher than quilted Charmin in the loo. Jesus prays for a purpose -

the reconciliation of all things - and prays for the people through whom God wants to accomplish that purpose.

Notice that Jesus doesn't pray for the church in opposition to the world. Jesus prays for the church as the yeast of the world, as those who, though seemingly small in number, may make an enormous impact on the world itself. Like bread, the potential for God's mission to grow and meet the daily hungers that the world faces multiplies exponentially with the presence of the yeast, with the presence of the church.

So far in this series on prayer, we've talked about the theology of prayer and a few different forms of prayer. Today, though, we're going to talk about the **what** and **who** we pray for. The **what** is the intent of our prayers, and the **who** are those people who specifically have the potential to make the **what** happen, to impact the world toward God's good will. That's what Jesus does here. Christ prays that God would empower the

disciples to continue the work Jesus began and strengthen them to accomplish God's goals on earth. Jesus models for us a wise way for prayer. Identify where the world isn't aligned with God's kingdom and who God could use to reshape the world in the way God intended. Then, pray for them, both the desired outcome and the people that God may use to bring that part of God's kingdom to life in our midst.

So let's ask: What are the changes we want to see in the world, the transformations that will help this earth reflect God's kingdom? Who are the people strategically placed to catalyze those changes?

We often talk about the shrinking levels of participation in church, especially among children and young people. Who might we pray for to make that change, and how might we pray?

Children and youth, certainly they could use our prayers, and especially that the Holy Spirit would inspire them when they

encounter the presence of God. But also teachers, parents, and guardians, those who have the most influence on younger generations, not only that they'd provide compassionate care, but that they'd see the spiritual dimension of wellness as a necessary and beautiful part of human development. That they might expose them to God's gifts at the font, on the table, and in the community of Christ's Body.

Julie Swanson, the CEO of Lutheran Family Services of Virginia, recently wrote an OpEd about the threats to Medicaid. As our sister in Christ, she points out that the proposed massive cuts to Medicaid, to the tune of \$800 billion, would threaten some of the most vulnerable people among us: the elderly, children, and people with disabilities. Bishop TD Jakes, a conservative prosperity Gospel preacher, recently made the same point. If we want to see these people cared for, and for society to see the God-given integrity within all people regardless of their ability to

care for themselves then we ought to pray for our politicians, whether we like them or not, whether we voted for them or not, whether they're in our party or not. We may pray that they'd see the compelling truth of God's wisdom over and above party platforms or Super PAC desires. We can also pray for an electorate that's informed about their options and wise enough to see through the fear tactics so peddled by political agendas. We might even pray for creative innovations among people like Julie Swanson, other social service providers, churches, and medical professionals, to find inspiring ways to care for these people at risk of abandonment.

It's always dangerous to develop theology from gourmet fast food. That being said, after Michelle and I ate lunch this week at Nagoya, I found myself quite inspired by the fortune inside of my cookie. "Faith is personal," it said, "but never private." Faith is personal, but never private. While this might sound at first like it

arose from Confucius's own lips, there's no discernible record I can find that attributes this saying to him or other Eastern wisdom teachers. Interestingly enough, as I researched the quote's origins, the closest thing to a progenitor that I found was a Jim Wallis quote: "faith is **always** personal but never private." Maybe Wallis found the same fortune and added always, or maybe some fortune cookie conglomerate heard the quote and modified it to avoid legal action. Either way, it's interesting that Wallis, a Christian teacher and progressive activist, connects this sentiment at the heart of our faith.

We personally encounter God in a number of ways - through the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, through worship, through service to the world and relationship with our neighbors, and yes, through prayer. But this personal engagement doesn't mean it's a private affair. We have personal relationships with all sorts of communities. My personal love of the Ohio State

Buckeyes isn't a private affair. Just asked anyone who's wearing Buckeye gear when I meet them. No matter where in the world we are, you can bet your nest egg that I'll cry out "O-H" and expect an "I-O" in return if I see someone wearing Buckeyes gear. We have personal feelings about this church, but they're not private either. Indeed, they're shaped by the public nature of this church's ministry of God's good news. These personal feelings arose in our public participation of worship on Sundays, through public events like weddings and funerals, through our public actions of service in the NRV, and our public sharing of the Gospel, that good news that Christ has come to give us all new life. Indeed, there's no private Gospel.

So when we pray, we ought to pray personally with a public intent. We pray for God's will to transform the world, and we pray strategically for those public figures that God might use to accomplish that change. We pray for those who, like the disciples,

are strategically placed to help people experience God's goodness in previously unimagined ways. Who are the disciples that Jesus called into particular places to make the world reflect God's kingdom in a particular way? And, for what it's worth, how has God called you as a disciple to live your personal faith in a public manner?

So, for our prayer practice today, I want you to sit upright, with both feet on the floor. Close your eyes or focus on an image here in the sanctuary. Then, ask yourself: *Where do you want to see God's goodness grow in the world? Where do you want to see God's goodness grow in the world?* Now, with that in mind, ask yourself, who is strategically placed to make the most positive impact in that way? In other words, who might God be preparing to use to make that difference? Then pray for them. Pray that God might empower them with wisdom and courage, with strength and

compassion, with the will to do what is right and the ability to persevere through challenges.

As we close this series on prayer, I want to pray for you, this congregation, filled with people who God has strategically placed in the world and who God is empowering to live the life of Christ in a world that desperately needs Christ's life. "Lord Christ, I thank you for these people you've gathered together as CLC. I thank you for the gifts, talents, passions, and wisdom they bring. Skilled artisans who create poetry, paintings, jewelry, and music. Caregivers who increase wellness through yoga, cooking, exercise, crafting, and prayer. Painters and woodworkers and computer scientists who help to maintain this space in which were formed and out of which we're sent as your disciples. People passionate about alleviating suffering and including all people in your community, regardless of their wealth, personal abilities, gender, sexuality, race, or ethnicity. Here in Radford, Lord, I see a

powerful need for more of this, especially compassion, justice, and vibrant life for all. I pray that you'd strengthen these people of CLC for service in the NRV, that you would give them courage to invite people into your mission here at CLC, and that you'd unite them with your son, who showed us the way to new life comes through self sacrifice, Jesus Christ our Lord: Amen.