

May 13, 2018

TEXT: John 17: 1,6–11

TITLE: Joint Custody

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Over the coming days, I plan to attend a couple reunions. Next week I'll spend a few days at Princeton for my seminary reunion and later this month I'll return to Kansas for my high school reunion. Reunions are complicated events. They require us to step back into the past, to call up the names of people we haven't seen in years, and try to remember what it felt like to be a younger version of ourselves. Yearbooks are pulled out and we see photos of ourselves with more hair and smaller waists. We vaguely remember what it felt like to go to school. We remember there were different cliques—the sports crowd with jocks and cheerleaders; the smart crowd who seemed to never study, the less smart crowd who definitely never studied; the shop class kids doing industrial arts, the music and drama kids doing fine arts; the messiness of adolescence and young adulthood—dances, dating, broken hearts, chasing dreams. It's fun to re-visit those days, but in the end they only remind us of how far we've traveled since we were young.

One of my favorite authors is Marilynne Robinson. In her novel Lila, one character—an old preacher named John Ames—says these powerful words: *The future always finds us changed.*¹ By that he means that we are not now who we were then. For good or for ill, measured by hair size or waist size perhaps—certainly when measured by life experiences, the future always finds us changed. That's what it means to be alive. We awaken each day in a place between the "then" and the "yet to come." We don't think about this fact a lot, except when things come up like a reunion that calls us back to days gone by, or a baptism or birth of a child compels us to wonder about a life yet to be lived. Here we are, people of the present with a past trailing behind us and a future waiting to unfold before us. What are we to make of this? How are we to spend our present moments so that things work out in the end? Well, in all seriousness, we'd better start praying.

Think about it. Prayer is something we do in a particular moment in time that connects us to God who, by definition, is eternal, beyond all moments in time. Prayer is something we do now that is designed to help us navigate what is to come. Now, here are the big questions: Does prayer matter? Does prayer make a difference? I don't have a simple answer. When we pray, we have faith that God hears our prayer. But it is highly unlikely that we are providing information to God that God doesn't already know or that our pleas are changing God's mind. We hope for healing, for safety and protection for ourselves and those we love; yet God wants all those same things too.

How prayer is answered is part of a larger mystery that we only see now in a mirror dimly. But I do know this: prayer changes us. It connects us more fully to

God, to this world and to one another. And that's incredibly important—because our lives are not just spent in the fleeting moment between the past and the future. Our lives are also spent in the contested space between God and the world, between the ways of heaven and the ways of earth.² When we pray, we are turning our focus towards God's end of the spectrum. And in that turning, we are changed. To re-phrase Marilynne Robinson, *prayer always finds us changed*.

Let me say a bit more about this contested space between God and the world. We all know that there is evil and good in our world. Sometimes it feels like the darkness has overcome every last vestige of light and hope. But God surprises us. Life wins. Goodness abides, sometimes in surprising ways. Emmanuel Levinas was a Jewish philosopher, who during the Second World War fought for the French resistance. He was captured and taken to a prisoner of war camp. He tells how all the prisoners got used to the guards treating them like they were less than human—that were unworthy of respect or care or compassion at all. Each day they would be taken outside the camp to work long and hard. But in the evening, as they were marched back behind the barbed-wire fence again, the prisoners would be greeted by a stray dog who had somehow found its way inside the camp. Levinas said the dog would bark and fling itself around with delight at seeing them. Through that stray dog's adoring eyes, the men were reminded each day of what it meant to be acknowledged by another living being—to be seen as having worth, value and purpose. It helped keep them alive in that contested space between God and the world.³

When we pray, we turn our face toward a loving God who shaped us, knows us, and unconditionally wills the best for us. As today is Mother's Day, we could say that God is like a mother encouraging her child to walk. The toddler—what an appropriate term for a baby learning to walk: a “toddler”—the toddler stands on unsteady feet as a mother crouches and calls out words of encouragement. The child feels the risk it is taking, how this is a new choice and something different, but the certainty of love and comfort in its mother's arms compels the toddler forward. The child could crawl away—or stand stock still staring down at the ground. But the mother's voice and open arms draw the child forward to a new way of life. Her voice leads the child to walk by faith into the future.

Prayer is when we turn our attention to God, our loving Parent who is there ever calling us forward. In that moment, we willfully silence any voice that would disrespect and dehumanize us. We refuse to define ourselves as helpless creatures, forced to crawl through life when we know we were made to walk and run. In prayer we turn our focus to our loving God, who has parental custody of us. And in that custody we find hope—we find healing—we find true life.

Now, the wonderful news for today is that there is more to this custody story. In John 17, Jesus was gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room when he offered a long prayer. It speaks about who Jesus is as the Son of God, the one who calls God his Father. Now I know that this part of the Christian faith is

difficult for many people. We struggle to understand how Jesus, a mother's child born long ago can also be the divine Christ, the Son of God. Again, this is a mystery, a part of this world's miraculous reality that we only see now as in a mirror dimly. But start with this basic affirmation: Jesus is as God is. (repeat)

Start with that, because that is where Jesus' prayer begins. Jesus begins to pray saying, "*Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.*" Jesus shares God's words with us – God's heart with us. Jesus is as God is. This whole incarnation, this connecting of earth and heaven has been done so that as Jesus and God are one, we too might be one—connected with one another and connected with God our Creator. Later in the prayer, Jesus goes one step further. In vs. 11, he prays: *Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.* The prayer is not just for unity. Jesus' prayer is about protection. Whatever happens in life, Jesus prays that we will be sustained as part of a union of love—a union that exists here and exists in heaven and for all time and space between those two realms.

The encouragement here is that we don't have single parental custody, finding ourselves struggling to navigate life on earth and praying to God in heaven, who may at times feel distant and far removed from us. We are children in joint custody, known by a God who created us and by Christ, who is as God is and is as we are. Christ walked this earth like us. He slept and ate and grew up and changed like us. He wept and laughed; he prayed long ago and continues to pray and intercede for us. Christ does all of this so that we might be one. We might find ourselves together in a joint embrace, held by God and Christ through the loving movement of the Holy Spirit. Words cannot capture this—but prayer comes close, especially when we pray to the ones who have joint custody over us.

When we think about the life to come, we sometimes use the language of glad reunions in the kingdom of God. School reunions look back to times already over and done with. Future reunions are still full of potential and possibility. We have nothing to be afraid of when we think about what is to come even as we grapple with what is here and now. Like a mother calling us spiritual toddlers forward, God invites us to walk by faith into the future. And like a friend and companion who knows us better than we know ourselves, Jesus is right beside us—the one who overcame this world's trials and tribulations, even the grim reality of death itself. Jesus is praying that each day we will know the same oneness that he enjoys with God.

Friends, we are held in joint custody. There is no better place to be. Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid. AMEN.

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Lila*, 2014, p. 223.

² Michael Bennett, *Feasting on the Gospels*, John 17:6–10 (Pastoral Perspective); pp. 219–220.

³ Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café*, p. 196.