

**May 13, 2018 (Journey Worship)**

**TEXT: John 17:1–11**

**TITLE: Praying for Those We Love**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Some say that when babies are born, they know three things: night, water, and mother. In those first moments after birth, the newborn child will seek out basic things like air (to fill lungs for the first time), food (to use its mouth for the first time), and warmth (as it adjusts to something less warm than a mother's womb). But ultimately the child from that very first moment is seeking to have one key question answered: Can I trust the world into which I've emerged? Am I safe? It takes time for children to learn the answer to that question, but how it is answered affects everything in their life from that day onward.

I know that today is Mother's Day and I've begun by focusing on the relationship of a mother and a child. But I want you to hear this topic in broad terms—terms that include biological parents and adoptive parents; family relationships beyond mothers that include grandparents, uncles, aunts, best friends, partners, caring teachers, and attentive mentors. Because the prayer at the heart of this sermon is about a bond of love that connects any two hearts—a bond modeled on the bond between Christ and us, between God and Christ, and thus between God and all of us.

So, as I started to say: the fundamental question for a child is: Am I safe? Is this world trustworthy? All who love the child will do their best to answer "Yes, it is. You will be safe and alright." There's a beautiful Broadway song written by Stephen Sondheim which says, *Nothing's gonna harm you, not while I'm around. Demons are prowling everywhere, nowadays; I'll send them howling, I don't care. I got ways. Nothing can harm you, not while I'm around.* From the beginning, a mother—a family—answers that question for babies. They offer food and warmth. They talk to them, sing, comfort, and swaddle them, all as a way of saying, "Yes, the world is trustworthy. You'll be alright so long as I'm around."

As every one of us knows, in time children grow up and grow apart from us. They become distinct and perhaps even distant from us. They become themselves, which by definition means they are no longer "us." And at some point, almost inevitably, there comes a moment when their basic trust is shaken—when the world disappoints them. Parents make mistakes; this world of stability and pleasure is sometimes also a place of pain and loss. In those moments, you turn to the deepest trust you know. You draw on the answer you carry within you, the way you answered the question you've carried with you since your birth. You look to the source of your trust—you call upon a fundamental belief that life is good. From a religious perspective, you turn to faith in the God of life who we profess is loving and steadfast, merciful and trustworthy. And continuing down this faith path, it is more than likely that in those moments you pray.

As you each know, there are lots of ways to pray. There are crisis prayers: *Please God, get me through this and I'll never ask for anything ever again.* There are casual prayers: *Oh Lord, give me enough gas in the tank just to get home.* (Or) *Dear God, don't tell me I left my wallet at home.* (Or) *Sweet Jesus let there be another diaper in the diaper bag!* There was the prayer of Michelangelo's mother who possibly prayed: *Lord, why can't my child paint on the walls like other children? It's so hard to get that stuff off the ceiling.* In the same vein, there was the prayer of Albert Einstein's mother: *Dear God, it's his senior picture. Can't you do something about his hair?*

But seriously, we tend to offer lots of prayers for the children who are in our lives, close by in the orbit of our heart. We ask God to protect them, encourage them, and keep them safe when they go out of our sight. We pray these prayers when the child takes off on a bike, pulls out in a car, drives away to school, or moves to a new city. We whisper prayers when they are ill and feverish, when they need splints and stitches, when they are sad or lonely or far away. We ask God to finish answering the question they asked at their birth—to let them know that the world is trustworthy. That nothing's gonna harm them, not while we're around.

So, let's think about prayers for a moment. The writer Corrie Ten Boom used to ask, "Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?" Is it something that guides you all the time or is it more like an emergency flare shot up to heaven in times of need? If we're honest, we are prone to treating prayer more as a spare tire than a steering wheel. But we can all improve our prayer life by finding regular times to say "Thank you, God" or "Lord be with me and with those I love." We know from scripture that Jesus regularly took time to stop and pray—to get away from the crowds and find a quiet place to rest and reconnect with the one he called "Abba." There's a reason we talk about the "practice of prayer." Prayer is something we practice, which means we do it over and over again, trying to improve our skills. It is part of a spiritual regimen designed help us get better in our body and soul.

Now let's turn to today's scripture passage. Out of a lifetime practice of prayer, on one special, difficult night, Jesus prayed a long prayer to his Father in heaven—a part of which we heard when we read verses from John 17. First off, Jesus wanted us to begin to understand his oneness with God, whom he called his Father. So Jesus' prayer begins: "*Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you. Glorify me with the glory I had in your presence before the world existed.*" That is very formal language. It is trying to express something that is very hard to put into words—namely, how Jesus is the incarnation of God, how Jesus is one with God. That is a difficult concept for a lot of people. Ultimately it is a mystery that we accept more with our heart than our head. But think of it in these two ways: 1) The words Jesus speaks are the words of God. 2) Jesus is as God is. (repeat) What we would hear from God comes to us from what Jesus tells us. And what we would see and understand about God is visible to us in who Jesus is and how he lived.

What is most reassuring about Jesus' prayer is what he says at the end of the section we read, when Jesus said: *Holy Father/Mother/Parent, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.* It is a prayer for unity, for protection and oneness so that we might never feel alone or abandoned—not by God, not by Christ, and not by one another as we walk by faith as part of the church, this community of Christ for now and forevermore.

In Jesus' words, we hear a prayer spoken as a loving parent and also addressed to a loving parent. Jesus' prayer is like a compilation of the little prayers we offer all the time: the worried prayer for safety, the pleading prayer for healing, the nervous prayer seeking wisdom or how to make the right choice, a mother or father or loved one's prayer for children nearby and children around the world. Jesus' words pull together all the prayers arising from our own hearts—which makes perfect sense, because we believe that's what Jesus does. Jesus is always praying for us. In Hebrews 7, Jesus is compared to the great high priests of old, where it says "*He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them*" (Heb 7:25).

Here's what this all means. Our prayers are never spoken in isolation. Our prayers are never just empty words tossed up hopefully into an indifferent and unresponsive starry sky. Whatever is on our heart is already on Christ's heart. Whatever is in our prayers is already in Christ's prayers. And we know that the Lord who hears our prayers is trustworthy, for this relationship has existed since the dawn of time—and God, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is with us, willing whatever leads to abundant life now and eternal life to come.

So the first questions we asked as newborn infants were very basic questions. We only knew three things: night, water, and mother. We emerged from the womb and we craved air, food, and warmth. But immediately thereafter, all of our being was attuned to the basic question: Can I trust the world into which I've emerged? Over time, that question was transformed into a prayer—perhaps for ourselves; certainly for the young and vulnerable and those we love in our lives. Hear the good news for today: Before that prayer was on our lips, it was already known by God and prayed by Christ—who are eternally one. Jesus' words then go a step further—not only praying for our protection but that we might be one as Christ and God are one. In that bond of love—in that incredible, nurturing, spirit-sustained bond, we exist. And it is there that we can say back for all the world to hear: Yes, I am not afraid. Yes, God's world is trustworthy. Ultimately nothing's gonna harm me, not while God's around.