

A Storytelling Commentary on John 17:1-11

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

After Jesus had spoken these words,
he looked up to heaven and said,
"Father, the hour has come.
Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,
since you have given him authority over all people,
to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God,
and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.
I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.
So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory
that I had in your presence before the world existed."

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world.
They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

Now they know that everything you have given me is from you.
For the words that you gave to me I have given to them,
and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you;
and they have believed that you sent me.

I am asking on their behalf;
I am not asking on behalf of the world,
but on behalf of those whom you gave me,
because they are yours.
All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world,
and I am coming to you.
Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me,
so that they may be one, as we are one.

This prayer is the climax of Jesus' last discourse, which began in chapter 13 of John. This is the Gethsemane scene in John, however, it doesn't take place in the garden nor is it a prayer of agony. Rather it is a prayer of intimacy and an expression of the relationship between the Father and Jesus, between those who are present at this prayer and Jesus. It is wholly distinctive in the Gospel tradition as well as the whole of the biblical tradition. In the traditions of Israel, Jesus' prayer would traditionally be known as the high priestly prayer, which is the prayer of the high priest on the day of atonement when the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies in the temple and pray for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. This tradition is in the background of this prayer.

One of the ways of understanding this prayer is that it stands in contrast to the shame of Jesus' death. Throughout John's gospel, there is talk about Jesus being glorified. The climax of this theme of glorification is his death on the cross, which was in its actual

character, a supremely shameful death. Jesus' prayer for those who have been given to him is a prayer for their protection from the evil one, a prayer that they may be one, and a prayer that they may know Jesus' identity.

The content of the prayer is less important than its dynamic. The love, the honor, the glory that Jesus expresses to God is important in conveying the meaning of the story. It is a somewhat extraordinary experience to have Jesus praying for you. This is a prayer that you can return to and experience Jesus' praying for you when you are facing difficult things in your life and when you feel separated from God.

The Verbal Threads

1. Glorify
2. Eternal life
3. Those you gave me, have given to me, etc.

These words link the different episodes together. I would suggest that you underline them and listen for them because they are the hooks on which the memory of this prayer can be hung. I do recommend learning this prayer by heart because there is a way in which getting these words into your heart and into your mind is one way of learning a central dimension of who Jesus is and how he thinks. It is very clearly a distinct experience of Jesus' mind that is present in the Gospel of John in contrast to the Synoptics. There are many lines of continuity between the character of Jesus in John and in the Synoptic Gospels, but there are also significant differences. This is one of those instances where John's Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels greatly differ, in Jesus' prayer before he is arrested. His prayer here doesn't have any sense of agony or desire that he not have to die. It is rather a prayer fully accepting that reality and praying that it may be for the glory of God.

Another dimension of this story is to hear it against the background of the stories of the ancient near east and specifically the stories of Homer. In Homer's great epic, *The Iliad*, there is constant conversation about the glory that will come to the great warriors of ancient Greece and Troy. Thus, Achilles gains glory by his power in battle and specifically by killing Hector. The glory of Achilles was his greatness in battle and finally in his "glorious" death. The heroic tradition in the Greco-Roman world was the most popular tradition in the world of John's time. The heroic tradition was directly related to the glory that one achieves in battle. In John's story, glory is gained in a certain sense by conflict or battle with the powers of evil. Jesus' glory is also gained by his death except that his death is of a very different character than the death of Hector or Achilles in *The Iliad*. Jesus doesn't kill anybody; he receives glory by giving his life for others and then being raised by God to new life. The glory of Jesus is then related to this heroic theme in the ancient Near East but it is of a radically different character.

The ancient heroic tradition is alive and well in the 21st century. The heroes of our age continue to be warriors, generals on horseback, and soldiers armed with weapons. Jesus' way to glory also continues, though without state support or widespread popular reputation. This is in part because Jesus' story and his glory has been disassociated from its ancient context and is not heard as an alternative to the glory of warfare. Nevertheless, the story of John's Gospel continues to call men and women to follow Jesus' way to glory. In that sense we can both hear and share Jesus' prayer to the Father.