

A Storytelling Commentary on John 17:6-19

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

This is the story for Ascension Sunday. It is part of Jesus' final prayer. It's at the end of his long talk with the disciples that began in chapter 13 with the washing of their feet. The talk builds up to the climax of this prayer. This prayer, then, is the culmination of Jesus' relationship with the disciples. It is also the point of transition from his being with them to his being with God. That's why it is an appropriate scripture for Ascension Sunday.

In the context of John, it is important to recognize that Jesus is now speaking to God, to the Father, but the disciples are watching. Jesus is praying for his disciples, but he is addressing the Father. That's what you want to catch in the telling of this. On the one hand, Jesus is talking to the Father; but on the other hand, he is addressing the audience as his disciples. He is inviting them to listen in on his prayer. In telling the story, you are issuing that same invitation to your audience. Jesus is praying for his disciples; so also, you are praying for the people who are gathered in your community.

The tone of the prayer is a tone of peace and of intimacy with God. It may also have been chanted in its original context, so you might want to experiment with chanting this prayer. The substance of the prayer is a paraphrase of Jesus' earlier prayer that he taught the disciples—the Lord's Prayer—which begins with, "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name." That is, "may your name be sanctified and may it be honored in the world." This is a prayer of petition because often God's name is not honored; it is taken in vain. It is used in curses every day. More importantly, this prayer that God's name might be honored is also a prayer for what might happen in relationship between God and the human race. Many people are fed up with God and think that God is responsible for all of the terrible things that happen in the world and either mock or hate the name of God rather than hallowing it. Jesus has made God's name known and, "They have received them [his words] and know in truth that I came from you. They believe that you sent me..." At the beginning of this prayer in John 17, then, is the prayer for God's name.

Jesus identifies the words that he speaks as words that have come from God. They have a divine source. These are words that God has spoken to Jesus and that Jesus has made known and has communicated to his disciples and to those with whom he has been in conversation throughout this Gospel. They are words he has communicated to the listener: "I have told everything that I have heard from the Father to them"—"them" referring to those who are listening. The prayer is for them. The prayer is that they might be saved from the powers of this world and that they might be one. What that means is that they were not one in the first century, just as they are not one now. That is why Jesus needed to pray and asked that their oneness might be restored. Their protection in God's name is "that they may be one as we are one."

This petition is one the central prayers for Ascension Sunday: that the community and the body of Christ might be one. It's a prayer for now as it was a prayer for then. The next part of Jesus' prayer is for the protection of his disciples, of those whom he loves. It is a statement that he has protected them; but also, now that he is leaving them, it is a prayer that God will protect them.

There are several things in this prayer that allude to the situation of Jesus' followers in the aftermath of the Jewish War. One is reference to "the hatred of the world," which was experienced in the hatred of the Romans for the people of Israel and their religion. The destruction of the Temple is a manifestation of this hatred. The prayer for protection reflects the fact that the Jews were not protected during the war. Vast numbers of the people of Israel were killed in that war. When the siege was broken, the Romans broke into the city of Jerusalem, went into the Temple and slaughtered thousands of people. So this is a real prayer for something that has not been part of the experience of those who are hearing it. The hatred of the world was a very specific dimension of the experience of all those who heard this prayer.

The prayer is also a petition that the disciples may have Jesus' joy completed in them. That has been an earlier part of Jesus' speech to them: "I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Jesus says this in the parable of the vineyard, the vine and branches discourse (John 15). There are several elements of those earlier speeches that are woven into this prayer. The protection that Jesus asks for at the end is that they would be protected from the evil one. The evil one is the ruler of this world.

It is also not out of the question that this has some connection with the political situation of the community. It may even be a reference to the Emperor in the period of John: Domitian. The author of the Apocalypse of John regularly referred to Rome and to the Emperor as various dimensions of "the evil one." This may have both a specific reference to Domitian as well as an apocalyptic reference to the powers of evil in the world. The opposition between Jesus, who has come to save people, and the powers of this world that are out to destroy them is very present here in this prayer.

The climax of the prayer is the prayer for sanctification. It is a prayer that the disciples might be made holy and that they might be made a part of the sanctified community.

Jesus' prayer in John 17 is related to the basic prayer by the founders of rabbinic Judaism. The *Mishna* is structured to enable the people of Israel to maintain the sanctity of the Temple, a holy place. Jesus' prayer is that his disciples would be sanctified as he himself is sanctified. That is, what you did before you went to the Temple, you sanctified yourself. You were made clean so that in the presence of God you were pure. The petition here is that they would be sanctified and have that virtue and experience of the purity of the Temple now. So this prayer resonates with the experience of the people of Israel in the aftermath of the loss of the Temple and the loss of that experience of intimacy with God in their central place of holiness.

This is regularly called "the high priestly prayer." Jesus takes the role of the high priest in the Temple, praying for the people, which is what happened on the Day of Atonement. The high priest went into the Holy of Holies and prayed for the forgiveness of the sins of the nation. Jesus here is praying for the people. He is praying for his own in the same way that the high priest would have prayed for the people in the Temple. That is the spirit of the recital that you want to convey in your telling of this scripture.