

Having been bored witless by the world's most boring preacher, Jack came out of church before the preacher had finished his sermon.

Outside he met a friend who asked, "Has he finished, then?"

He replied, "Oh yes, he's finished, but he won't stop!" . . . Keith Alexander

### Unity and Diversity

I've probably told you this before but when I first let people know I was going to seminary, all of a sudden I got asked to pray a lot. "Pray for me," people would say. At dinners, at meetings – all of a sudden I was seen as an expert in prayer. I'm not sure why that was. Maybe people thought I had more authority with God now that I was going into "official" ministry. I guess my fellow Congregationalists never really picked up on that fact that we members of the church are all ministers, and we all know how to pray.

That's right – the Lord's Prayer is known universally. It sets the pattern – talk to God, offer your needs to God, ask for guidance, and give credit to God. I guess the challenge is that the Lord's Prayer is so well known most of us are intimidated that our words will not be poetic enough or clear enough. We think our prayers can't live up to the one Jesus taught.

But that is not the only prayer Jesus offered. Our gospel lesson takes us back once again to that fateful Thursday night in the upper room. Jesus has been talking for a long time – three chapters in the gospel. He's preparing his friends for what it will be like when he is gone. Then Jesus prays for them. He also prays for a long, long time. Jesus knows what is coming – for him and then for his followers. But does he ask to be spared? Does he ask for divine intervention? No. He prays for his friends, the disciples. He prays that they have the strength to face the challenges ahead. He prays that they will work together and carry on in his stead.

It doesn't stop there. Jesus prays <sup>20</sup>"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Jesus was praying for us. That we may all be one. That we will work together as the first disciples did. Praying for one another, caring for one another, working to include those on the margins.

I don't know about you, but I find it incredibly humbling to know that Jesus was praying for *me* that night. He was praying for you, and you . . . for all of us who have come to know him and believe. The holy mystery of it all – and this is where the account of Jesus' ascension comes in – is that Jesus continues to be "in the Father and the Father is in" him. This means that Jesus is still praying for us. That we may all be one.

When the United Church of Christ formed back in 1957 we chose this same scripture to be our "motto." That they may all be one. For the UCC it made sense since there were four different denominations uniting together when so many other churches were splitting up. That didn't mean all congregational churches came on board, and some have left the UCC since then. So what does it mean when Jesus prays, "that may all be one?"

I know for a fact it doesn't mean Jesus expects us to all be cookie-cutter Christians. We don't all believe exactly the same thing, religiously or politically. History shows it simply isn't possible. Our Thursday morning study group or 12 to 15 people don't always agree, so how could a world of Christians? Our recent study, called "God in America" demonstrates just how fractious and un-unified a nation born of Christian belief and influence can be. The first settlers, Franciscans and Native peoples, Billy Graham and communism; and Martin

Luther King, Jr and the civil rights movement. Through it all dissenters were outcast, arrested, and some even had their homes vandalized. It seemed just when the majority thought they had their form of Christianity right, a small number called them to the truth the Jesus taught . . . and faced those challenges Jesus knew would arise.

Dr. King stepped into the ministry just about the same time Miss Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus. He was asked to lead the struggle, and the civil rights movement began. Deeply rooted in scripture and religious upbringing, one thing Dr. King and all those folks fighting for justice knew how to do was to pray. Instead of violence, they would turn the other cheek by kneeling to pray. When warned to back down, they persevered. When politicians put up road blocks, they found ways around them...eventually seeing anti-segregation and voting equality laws enacted.

No Jesus doesn't want us to be cookie cutter Christians. He wants us to get to know the stranger, and appreciate the diversity with which God created us. He wants us to work together to continue his path of reconciliation in some arenas and call for justice in others. He needs us to reach out to the marginalized and work to break down the barriers that keep us apart. He wants us to be able to pray for those with whom we don't see eye to eye. And the mystery of prayer is that while we may be asking God to change someone else, God changes us instead.

May we all be one in our prayer...simply praying as a people of God, opening up to God with whatever words or feelings that come. Prayer is not a magic formula to get right. Prayer is in its simplest form a conversation with God. When prayer reaches into our depths, when we let that Holy Spirit Jesus talked about sending have its way, prayer can move mountains.

Since I've been serving this church, I've asked our church members, our ministers who are on church council and deacons, to offer the prayers at meetings. It's not because I don't want to do it, or that I can't. It's because the words spoken in that prayer time are real and honest. And I can tell you more times than not I can feel the Holy Spirit at work in those moments.

May we all be one as ministers of the gospel. Let us be one in Christ. Let us be people of prayer. And here's how we do it: "When we pray, we're invited to be realistic, to be honest, to share what is hard in our lives. And to ask for help. To ask God to hold onto us, to help us not just survive but to flourish. And to do it together. To be in relationship with each other, supporting each other, celebrating with each other, bearing each other's burdens and hopes, disappointments and dreams." (Lose) That is what Jesus meant.

David J. Lose holds the Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary. Gleanings from his post for 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org); quote from his blog Prayer and Mystery posted 15 May 2012