
A Mother's Prayer

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Easter 7 – Year B

I imagine that there are hundreds of things a mother does in order to be a good mother. There is caring, and loving, and tending; and there is feeding, and nourishing, and encouraging. And hundreds more tasks and responsibilities, most of the time gladly accepted by good mothers. (Most of the time!) Thank you!

But, on this Mother's Day in the United States, there is another activity of a good mother which I want to focus on. I want to speak about the activity of praying. A good mother prays. When we think of mothers of whatever type – birth mothers, adoptive mothers, godmothers, grandmothers, neighborly mothers, friend mothers, our own motherhood of those we love – let us consider prayer. A good mother prays for her children, her brood, her family, the neighborhood, the world. A good mother prays.

And how should she pray? What example should she use? I pose a daring question this morning: Could it be that our gospel for today, from the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John, is that example of a good motherly prayer?

John, chapter 17, a tremendous passage, is known by scholars as the great high priestly prayer of Jesus. But could it really be the great “high motherly prayer” of Jesus? In this passage, John 17, we hear Jesus praying. It is the night of the Last Supper, an intimate meal. Jesus probably knows that his own life is about to change dramatically. He might even be saying Good-Bye to his disciples. He is praying to his God, his Father, for his disciples. He prays for their protection. For their holiness. For their truth. He is truly caring for his disciples in prayer.

Let's review that prayer today. But before we do, let me also review some words from one of the great Anglican theologians of our history, the mystic, Julian of Norwich. As many of you know, she was a fourteenth century English mystic known for her beautiful words of comfort, including the gentle line: “All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Lady Julian, too, spoke the deep and gentle words of a caring mother.

Julian of Norwich, however, is also known for her vision of God as Mother. In her mystic sight, Julian realized that “God is as really our Mother as he is our Father” (*Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 59). Indeed, Julian would go on to say that, Jesus, too, is our Mother. She said, “Jesus Christ who sets good against evil is our real Mother. We owe our being to him—and this is the essence of motherhood.” And later: “So Jesus is our true Mother by nature at our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by taking on our created nature” (*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 59).

This morning, what if this beautiful prayer in John 17, the prayer of Jesus for his disciples, is also the beautiful prayer of a mother caring for her children?

Listen to these words again. You can follow along in the printed words of the bulletin, or in any Bible, beginning at John 17, verse 6:

Verse 17:6 “*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.*” A good mother realizes that children are a gift. Indeed, there comes a tender and powerful moment in a mother's life when she realizes that her children, her own children, actually belong—not to her—but

to God.

A mother lives with this tender tension that children belong to both her and God. They are hers, for sure; and they are also God's. And so Jesus prays in verse 7-8. *"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."* And Jesus, like an honest mother, will conclude that *"All mine are yours, and yours are mine"* (John 17:10).

"I have been glorified in them," says Jesus (John 17:10). And so it is with mothers, at least on good days. When things are going well, when children are strong and happy, a mother feels duly proud, even glorified to a degree. That is a just pride, indeed! A mother wants to be proud of her children, as Jesus wants to be proud of his disciples.

And then, the great high priestly prayer of Jesus takes a somber and realistic tone. Jesus knows that he is leaving, that he is coming to the Father, that he is departing this earth. Jesus, like a good mother, prays for his disciples' protection and guardianship. *"I am coming to you,"* says Jesus, *"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me"* (John 17:11).

A good mother realizes that she will not always be with the children. Children grow. Parents depart. People die. Separation, inevitable separation, always occurs in healthy parent-child relationships. Holy separation is not a bad thing. Bitter separation is a bad thing, but not holy separation. Holy separation is growth, growth towards wholeness and love. And so Jesus prays, *"While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost"* (John 17:12).

In spite of the hardship, a mother's prayer is joy. Joy is the mark of holy relationship. Thus, a mother's prayer for children will realize that departures occur, but that the joy between parent and child always endures. Listen to how Jesus prayed: *"But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves"* (John 17:13).

And then, Jesus continues: *"I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world"* (John 17:15-16). A good mother knows that she cannot have her children removed from the tough things of this world, including the suffering and pain of the world. A good mother cannot take her children from the world. But she can give her children a special identity in this world. She can teach them, like Jesus taught his disciples, that they belong to another domain, another family, the domain of heaven and love.

Jesus goes on to pray for his disciples that they be sanctified in truth (John 17:17). That they be sanctified by the word of God. That word, of course, is love. The word is love. All mothers, surely, pray for the word of love in their families.

And then, listen to this. Instead of asking God to remove his disciples from the world, Jesus actually sends his disciples into the world! *"As you have sent me into the world,"* says Jesus *"so I have sent them into the world"* (John 17:18). Isn't that the mission of a good mother, as well? Not to hide her children from the world in fear, but to instill in them the courage and strength—and the love!—to enter the world with the gifts of what they have learned.

Each of us goes out into the world equipped with the gifts given to us by our mothers. I mean birth mothers, adoptive mothers, godmothers, motherly neighbors and friends. The gifts from all those who have been mothers to us. One of those gifts is the gift of life itself. Mothers truly give us life. There are other great gifts, of course. The gifts of love, of encouragement, the gifts of care and tenderness.

And, the gift of prayer itself. Mothers pray for us. And each of us who exercises a motherly ministry prays for our family, our brood, our parish, our town, our country. Yes, we who are men can certainly exercise this motherly ministry of prayer.

All of us have benefitted from the motherly ministry of Jesus. We have been the beneficiaries of this very prayer that Jesus delivers in John 17. In the great motherly ministry of Jesus, this prayer continues for us even today. Let us pray, then:

The High Motherly Prayer of Jesus:

6 *"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. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 8 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. 9 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. 10 All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 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. 12 While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. 13 But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. 15 I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. 16 They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. (John 17:6-19).

AMEN.