



Roanoke, Virginia

May 12, 2024

## *“Bridging the Gap”*

*John 17:6-21*

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Our reading, which will go through verse 21, is part of a prayer that ends Jesus’s Farewell Discourse, as it is known. The Farewell Discourse runs from chapter 13 through chapter 17, when the disciples and Jesus then leave the upper room, make their way across the Kidron Valley to the Garden.

The gospel of John can be divided into two parts, the ministry of Jesus and the departure of Jesus. The farewell discourse is the hinge by which all that Jesus has said and done through his public ministry now points to his own glorification, thus the glorification of those who follow him. The setting of the Farewell Discourse is in the Upper Room where Jesus has washed the disciples’ feet, gave them a new commandment of love, promised the Holy Spirit, issued his final two “I AM” statements, and offered encouragement as he told them he will leave them soon. And then, in chapter 17, Jesus abruptly stops talking to the disciples, looks up to heaven, and begins to pray.

Listen in as Jesus prays that night and listen for the Word of God.

*<sup>6</sup>“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. <sup>7</sup>Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.*

*<sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup>They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>17</sup>Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup>As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup>And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

*<sup>20</sup>“I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who 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.”*

Praying is one of the most fundamental activities we are called to do as Christians. It's up there with reading the Bible, worship, and joining in community. However, praying can be intimidating. I mean, we have all witnessed that awkward silence when the question is asked... “Would anyone like to pray?”

Maybe the hesitation is our assumption that our prayers must be perfect, that we must use language that is elevated, eloquent, in order, and right—that we need to say the right things: God of earth, wind, and sky; Magnificent Mighty Maker. Or we think our prayers need to be beautifully poetic: Grant that our eyes be opened to the beauty of thy wonder and mystery, and our ears be attuned to the harmonies of thy heart.

What about this prayer before eating a candy bar: Sweet God, giver of chocolate, thank you for the WOW you have provided in this snicker bar, so that we may taste and savor your goodness with each bite.



There is hesitation, though. But like I said, prayer is one the most fundamental things we do as Christians. “Prayer is a gift from God, who desires dialogue and relationship with us, and prayer is a posture of faith and a way of living in the world.”<sup>1</sup> That is how our *Book Of Order* describes it.

No matter the words we use, because prayer is a gift and a posture of faith, prayer is our personal connection with God, it is how we stay in relationship with God and invite God to be part of our daily lives, no matter the circumstance or season. As one theologian puts it, “prayer is the divine within us appealing to the divine above us.”<sup>2</sup>

In Jesus’s prayer, we see how the divine within him is appealing to the divine above him. Jesus illustrates his close relationship with and resemblance to the Divine Source of all things, to whom he prays, “all mine are yours, and yours are mine . . . we are one.” The first part we can say alongside Jesus— “all mine are yours” because everything and everyone we have is from God. But the second part is unique only to Jesus— “yours are mine.” Jesus and God share all things. And because Jesus shares in the divine nature as the Son of God and shares in our human nature as the Son of Man, he is able to bridge the gap between God and humanity.<sup>3</sup> Jesus in his role as mediator can provide the gifts of God to the people of God.

And there are three gifts that Jesus prays for: revelation, providence, and sanctification.<sup>4</sup> These are big, churchy words; so, another way to say it is that Jesus prays for the gift of the knowledge *of* God, the gift of loving care *from* God, and the gift of being set apart *by* God.

The Gospel of John begins with the intimate relationship of Jesus and God—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory . . . full of grace and truth.” This shared, yet distinct existence is mentioned at the beginning of this prayer too: glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. Jesus has received knowledge of God from the Source, and through his life and ministry, he has passed on this knowledge to his disciples. Again, because Jesus shares God’s divinity and participates in the Trinitarian life he has “firsthand” knowledge of God’s nature and character and purposes. And, because Jesus shares in the nature of humanity he can offer this knowledge to those he has encountered in the world, namely his disciples who are with him. As the word not merely spoken but made flesh, Jesus reveals God most fully to humanity. He has “made God’s name known,” which is to say that Jesus has displayed the very nature and character of God. Throughout John’s

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Order, PC(USA), 2023-2025*; “Prayerful Participation” W-2.0202.

<sup>2</sup> I remember this quote as attributed to C.H. Dodd, but I do not remember where I read it.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of “bridging the gap” comes from David S. Cunningham in his “Theological Perspective” essay on John 17:6-19 found in *Feasting On The Word* commentary Year B, Volume 2, pg. 546.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



gospel, Jesus has identified himself using the same “I AM” name God self-designates in the Old Testament. So, anyone who encounters Jesus need look nowhere else to learn of God. In and through Jesus, God is revealed. And that is part of his prayer for the disciples: that God is revealed to them and through them.

Secondly, Jesus prays that the disciples will have God’s providential care, the loving care a parent has for a child. This is translated as “protect” in our reading and is closely associated with the idea of “pay attention to” and “carefully attend to.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus, as the “Good Shepherd” has provided this careful protection, but now as he prepares to depart, he passes the onus of protection and care back to God. “Love them and care for them by the power of your name, so they may be one as we are one” so they may share in the same love and care as we share. Jesus prays for God’s protection and love and care for his disciples.

Lastly, Jesus prays for the disciples to be sanctified. To be sanctified is to be made holy. But it is more than doing good deeds or going above and beyond. For something to be “sanctified,” it is to be set apart, particularly for God’s purpose, in a way that distinguishes it from its ordinariness. Much like how the waters of baptism are set apart for a particular purpose that distinguishes it from ordinary use, the disciples are called and set apart for a particular purpose that distinguishes them from the ordinary. And it is through the truth that the disciples are to be set apart. That truth is God’s word. It is because the disciples’ experience Divine revelation in and through the life and ministry of Jesus, who is God’s word and truth, they are set apart for their life and ministry in the world. Just as Jesus was sent into the world by God, so now Jesus sends the disciples into the world. And knowing that the world is a hostile place, it is Jesus’s prayer that the disciples be set apart *from* the world in order to bring good news *to* the world.

Jesus knows what the disciples will face because he himself has experienced it and will experience it to the fullest on the cross. That is why Jesus offers his prayer for the disciples.

After betrayal and predicted denial, after concerned questions and foretold rejections, the disciples did not need another lesson, another sermon, another miracle. That upper room was filled with pain and abandonment. With anxiety and loss. With unsettled hearts and fearful souls. And right there, right in the midst of all that is going on, known and unknown, Jesus offers this pray for their sake.

Jesus prays for the disciples right in front of them, for the things he knows they feel, the things he knows they will encounter, and the hope he has for them. Jesus says, “I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy complete in and among themselves.”

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<sup>5</sup> Cunningham, *Feasting On The Word, Year B, Vol.2, p.548.*



Chelsey Harmon writes in her commentary that “when we read the gospel, we read less about Jesus protecting the disciples from physical threat, and much more about Jesus protecting God’s beloved from being excluded—from children and women, to the poor and oppressed, even the rich and powerful are invited into the truth. Jesus continually teaches the disciples, over and over again, how our traditional understandings of life have missed the main point of God’s words of truth. He shows the disciples a life that fulfills every aspect of the law given by the Father—even while he broke Sabbath laws and cleared the temple and witnessed to his own identity as the Son of Man and Son of God.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus bridges the gap between God and humanity; and through his death and resurrection, Jesus also bridges the gap between life as we know it and life that is abundant.

This too was part of his chosen self-sanctification: a life set apart in holiness and true blessing, one that truly witnessed to the love of the Triune God for humanity. For Jesus is the way that is the truth about this life!

Jesus was sent into the world, set apart for a unique purpose to reveal the love and grace of God to a world that he knows will not listen, yet it is the same world that God so loves, as the famous verse puts it. As the Son of God and the Son of Man, Jesus bridges the gap between God and humanity, between heaven and earth, between power and principalities and the poor and the oppressed. Being sanctified in the truth of God’s word, the disciples then—as we, the disciples now—are set apart to do the same.

We are sent into the world to reveal the love and grace of God to a world that pushes back, to a world that will try to exclude, to a world that prioritizes power and profit. Yet we are still to love it, care for it, and extend the truth to it. The world is both everything that does not know and rejects the Word and Truth *and* those who belong to God, but the world—those who oppose and those who believe—is also the object of the God’s love and the object of God’s and the disciples’ ongoing love and mission through the Spirit.

We are in the world, but we do not belong to the world. We belong to God.

Our being set apart together, in unity, is a sign of the truth of God’s word. As Jesus describes it here, unity flows from knowing him and God, knowing the word of God, and being sanctified in that word, which is truth, through the Spirit. We are invited into the union of the Trinity, a unity that then embodies love between all things.

Our being set apart is the call to be a communal witness in the world. Jesus’ life on earth was for a specific time, but the body of Christ, the church, continues to inhabit the world. In and

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<sup>6</sup> Chelsey Harmon, commentary on John 17:6-19, written for the *Center for Excellence in Preaching*



through Christ, God is revealed. In and through Christ, we are set apart. And, as the one body of Christ, we too can bridge the gaps of the world, as we make God's name known.

So, where in the world is God sending you?

To whom in the world is God sending you?

Perhaps, now the famous verse can say: For God so loves this world, that Christ now sends you into the world, to make God's name known to the world, so that the world may come to know life, the life that really is life, life that is abundant and eternal.

May it be so. Amen.

