

Pray

What type of relationship do you have with Christ?

The question comes to mind as I struggled with the sermon this week. Why the struggle? We just heard a beautiful prayer Jesus prays in John's Gospel Ch 17, a prayer of intimacy and unity for his friends the disciples, in essence a prayer FOR US who now believe because the first disciples passed along the Good News of Jesus. That's awesome. This is not us praying to God, like Our Father, who art in Heaven or Now I lay me down to sleep or a table grace like Over the teeth, over the gums look out stomach, here it comes. No, this is Jesus praying for us. So why the struggle?

Maybe it's tied up in emotional struggle I felt this week, of separating the seven tomato plants I had grown all winter and brought to the plant sale yesterday. My little tomato babies! Be fruitful. Multiply! This coming weekend our son Nicholas gets married to Alexandra Bryski in Guelph but it's Covid and there are restrictions to follow. Today is also the anniversary of our infant son Andrew's death. He lived five days and died on this day, May 16, 1992.

I wonder what you're feeling this beautiful May day; frustration perhaps, around the province's announcing two additional weeks of stay-at-home order, no golfing, tennis, no recreational sports teams or no CNE this summer, again. Thankfully, we realize as people of faith that, as we mature, we are not ruled by our feelings, our memories, our circumstances, our intellect or by trying to be good people. There is so much more.

So, as we listen in on this beautiful prayer of Jesus from John ch 17 – Jesus is giving a master class on prayer and intimacy, there is the possibility of hope and encouragement and even excitement. Let me explain.

This prayer by Jesus was meant not just for his closest friends 2000 yrs ago but a prayer for us today. As we began, I asked, 'what type of relationship do you have with Jesus Christ?', if you are like most Christians, you are respectful of Christ and seek to honour him with your service. You are probably faithful and loyal and careful to behave according to Christian standards, most of the time, even to the point of living sacrificial lifestyles, even to the point of actually associating with a church. But are you regularly having times of intimate embrace with Christ? Is your relationship deepening and developing spiritual maturity? Did I tell I am studying at Tyndale University this Spring, taking an online course on Spiritual Formation?

Author Terry Wardle tells a story of driving with a well-known Christian speaker. In the course of the conversation Terry Wardle mentioned how his heart was aching for a deeper intimacy with the Lord. The speaker looked stunned and after a few moments said, "I see myself as a man under orders. I receive my instructions from God and then set out to do what He commands. I have not even considered intimacy with Christ is available or necessary."

(Outrageous Love, Terry Wardle, pg. 44) That may sound servant-like and obedient, but there is something missing in that concept of Christian living. Jesus lived his entire life in intimate union with God the Father. He repeatedly made reference to the fact that this union determined what he said and did. Jesus told his disciples in John 17:10 that everything he had, belonged to the Father and that everything the Father had, belonged to him. The relationship Jesus had with the heavenly Father was marked by something greater than honour, respect, loyalty, and obedience. Theirs was a relationship of the most intimate love.

There are at least three obstacles to intimacy with Christ for us humans.

1. If we just have the right thinking we can access God. Christianity is more than right thinking; it's about living in a relationship with Jesus even when it doesn't make sense.
2. If we imagine God only as judge who hears evidence of sin and guilt then forgives, then who wants to have an intimate relationship with a judge, unless of course, you're married to one? Here are two images for Christianity you might consider: incarnation, not only did Mary his mother, hold the creator and redeemer of the world in her arms when Jesus was an infant, now as the crucified, risen, ascended Saviour, he holds us with wounded hands in his arms. A second image is the cross set off by natural light, visible and invisible, the embrace of love and truth, you and the Lord equally bathed in light, the new nature of Christ's spirit pulsating more brightly in each other's presence.
3. If we just keep God at a safe distance, we can be loyal but don't let him in my man cave or let him see into my purse. His power can be intimidating, his purity and holiness absolutely unnerving. More than a few people have told me that they feel unworthy to ask the Lord for anything much for themselves, God must be too busy or they fear God will see their impurities and inadequacies and either scold them or reject them outright. However, that is not how Jesus sees people.

When we read the New Testament, we see that Jesus quickly established intimacy with the people he met. Whether talking with a woman at a well, a religious leader in a garden, or a fisherman by a lake, he cut instantly to the heart of the matter and soon these people revealed to Jesus their innermost secrets. Jesus drew out a hunger so deep that the people crowded around him just to touch his clothes.

In the centre of breathless activity, of listening, relating, teaching, healing, revealing, Mark records, 'very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.' In a lonely place Jesus finds the courage to follow God's will and not his own, to speak God's words not his own. It is the lonely place, where Jesus enters into intimacy with the Father that his ministry is born. Yet, Jesus is the kind of guy you could have a cup of coffee or a beer with. So, how do we replace fear of intimacy with growing faith in Jesus?

In the Children's Video today, Michelle Alexander was teaching her daughter Brooklyn about a key sequence Jesus describes in his prayer in John 17.

1. God gives his word to Jesus. 2. Jesus gives the word to the disciples. 3. Jesus' disciples give the word to us. 4. We can give those words to others. All of this, as Jesus prays, is carried out in the context of relationships.

John's Gospel tells us that just before we hear his prayer, Jesus had finished washing the disciples' feet as a demonstration of his self-emptying, his humble and cleansing love for them. They have celebrated the Passover meal, Jesus' last supper, what we call the Eucharist or Holy Communion. Judas has just left to go and betray Jesus. It's been a busy night. But there is a focus in this prayer, an intense heavenly focus when you know something of significance is about to happen, like major surgery when you call your lawyer and make sure your will is up to date or you call the church and ask for prayer. Jesus goes to prayer, right there in the Upper Room, the aromas of supper still linger – of roasted lamb and bitter spices and red wine, of oily smoke from the lamp and of 12 men's pungent presence. Matthew, Mark and Luke record Jesus' prayer taking place not in the Upper Room but in the Garden of Gethsemane. The location matters less than the content and passion of the prayer.

What is evocative in this listened-into conversation is the idea of 'the world' - Jesus uses the word 'world' twelve times - whether being in the world or out of the world. Jesus has been battling an unseen enemy in the world, his entire ministry, following his baptism three years before, till this moment. The disciples, especially Peter get a taste of that bitter struggle when he declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the Saviour and therefore he won't die. "We'll be victors, leading a longed-for revolution, reclaiming the glory of Israel!" Jesus looks at the disciples but says to Peter, his best friend, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on the things of this world." (Matt 16:23) So, the disciples' get a glimpse of the ungodly agenda going on behind the scenes, that seeks to thwart Jesus' prime objective, to accomplish God's will and lose nothing of what God gave him.

The world itself, is not our enemy. "God so loved the world that he gave his son..." It's not the world, but the ruler of the world who seeks to search and destroy those who are like Jesus and not 'of the world.' That's us. If you don't think as a believer that you're a target for the enemy's search and destroy mission, don't miss this petition in the middle of Jesus' prayer that spoke to me this week, in my struggle, when Jesus knows he's leaving earth, returning to heaven and he prays, John 17:11,12 "¹¹Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me."

Why is protection necessary? Is it possible that the enemy of Jesus would now become the enemy of his followers? Is this what Jesus means that while they are in world, they are vulnerable to similar attacks? How well aware are we of the enemy's strategy, that our faith is not just about forgiveness of sin, our comfort, a guarantee of heaven, or a community of nice friends, but that we are part of a vanguard of irregulars, not so acclimatized to the world that

we cave to its negative, self-seeking influence, that we are in need of protection from that which would destroy us, or distract us to the point where we lose sight of the big picture; the vision, the mission of God, to love God and others and one's self as God loves, to make disciples as Jesus does, to know his presence, intimately and wonderfully as he promised never to leave us, now or when we die. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; ³⁸ therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." Matthew 9:36,37 I get excited about our times together; when we can win the battle, with Christ in me the hope of glory.

From those first eleven about to lose their leader, to now over 2.3 billion Christians with Christ as the Head of his Church, he has done well at protecting us and inviting us to know him more intimately, a relationship not just for super saints but for everyday people who believe, who are worth protecting. Whose faith is of such value that the enemy goes to great lengths to throw us off course, with things that offend us or make us afraid, or sad or angry. Anything to keep us down.

As we anticipate Pentecost next Sunday the anniversary of the sending of the Holy Spirit, the birthday of the church, we ask as Jesus does, not to be taken out of the world but to be protected in the name that God gave, so that we may be one, as Jesus and the Father are one. We who believe are not of this world. As we have received the Spirit in our baptism and as we choose to be regularly filled with the Spirit, we are sanctified, set apart for greater things Jesus promised his followers would do, sent into the world with the Good News of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus high priestly prayer in John 17, is not a vulnerability to be feared, but an intimacy to be fulfilled, just as you do not fear intimacy when you know how to be kind to your family or your cat or your plants or open up to your therapist. The intimacy Jesus offers is not dissuaded by our failure to perform or by multiple rejections of him. We are invited to grow into the kind of people who live and move in relation to, in intimacy with, the one who first loved us. Unity is found in that. Encouragement is found in that. Hope that our deepest longings are met in intimacy with our Saviour Jesus. So, here's a suggestion; take up a psalm, say Psalm 62, read it. Mull it over. Read it again. Let God in.

What kind of relationship do you and I have with Christ? One that makes us laugh and cry and give and receive, to press on despite losses and frustrations. That's not only enough, that's what makes getting up worthwhile, on sad days and beautiful days.

Thanks be to God.