

Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 17, 2026
John 17:1-11

When I was in my late 20s and feeling invincible, I made an ill-advised decision to load myself up like a pack mule with luggage. As I recall, I decided not so much to carry my bags as to wear them slung across my body. That is when I felt and heard the crunch. Within a few days, I learned I had compromised my C-5 vertebra.

While it was a painful and protracted recovery, I was confident that I had managed to maintain the illusion of my invincibility until congregation members started asking after my well-being. Eventually, one member totally blew my cover and let me know, in no uncertain terms, “You didn’t cover up anything. You’ve smelled like Icy-Hot since November.”

I was chastened but unbowed! Unbowed, that is, until the words of another member let me know, in no uncertain terms, that God’s tender mercies are even for me. She was a woman with whom I had spirited theological disagreements and happened to be at the church’s reception desk one day when I hobbled into the office. She inquired about my injury and then added, “I have been praying for you.”

I replied that I was deeply moved to hear that, to which she answered, “I always pray for you because you are the DRE but now I pray specifically for your healing as well.”

People of faith have varying viewpoints on prayer. Some believe that praying for others causes our own attitudes to change. Some believe that we change the world with our prayers. As Pope Francis famously said, “You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That is how prayer works.”

However disciplined or undisciplined our prayer lives may be, we know that prayer is part of being a Christian. Here in John’s Gospel, Jesus prays for his disciples on the night they will betray him. To borrow the words of a

hymn often sung on Maundy Thursday, “Turn not from his griefs away;
Learn of Jesus Christ to pray.”

Jesus speaks to God as a friend on behalf of his friends. “I’m not going to be here any longer, so God, protect this fledgling community, and let them be with one another like we are with one another.”

Jesus knows, I suspect, that it is going to be hard for these disciples and must have known it would be hard for his disciples, for the community of believers, even now. It will be hard to get along with each other sometimes. It will be hard to keep the faith when we cannot see our Lord. It will be hard to keep going when the forces arrayed against the church are seemingly intractable. It is especially hard now, when what it means to be a Christian is called into question by creeping nationalism attempting to wrap the cross in a flag.

Jesus loves those who have tried to follow him in every age, so Jesus prays for them. Jesus wants the world to be better because of his disciples, and so he prays for us.

In our lesson from Acts today, we learn that after Jesus ascends, the disciples and the women devote themselves to prayer. It has mattered from the church’s beginning that we pray for one another, just as Jesus prayed for the disciples. And likewise, it makes all the difference in the world, as we read in Romans 8:26, that the Spirit even now prays for us with sighs too deep for words.

Years ago, I taught a workshop on the topic of prayer. I started by asking the participants what they hoped to learn. Their responses surprised me. They literally wanted me to teach them how to pray. They felt they didn’t know how to ask, to form the words of intercession. What I had planned was a bit more esoteric, so I ditched the lesson I came with. Instead, we talked for an hour about praying the psalms when the situation calls for lament. I walked them through how I construct the prayers for Sunday worship. I dredged up from the recesses of my memory the old youth group acrostic ACTS prayer (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication).

When we concluded, a member of the group said to me, "Thank you. This was useful. I have words now."

Jesus loved his disciples, so he prayed for them. Pastors love their congregations, so pray for them. We love one another, and so we pray for each other, just as Jesus prayed we would.

Questions for reflection on John 17:1-11

1. What do you wish you knew about prayer?
2. Recall a time when someone was praying for you. How did you feel about it?
3. What prayers are most urgent for you these days?

Ascension Thursday was actually observed at St. Peter's Lutheran Church on Gratiot and by golly, their parking lot was full, there was the Men's Lutheran Choir, many clergy (male only) participants, and a communion service.