

Jesus' Mystical Prayer

“ . . . that they may be one, even as we are one,” Jesus prayed. This verse comes near the end of the longest prayer of Jesus in any of the gospels, the so-called “Farewell Prayer.” I wonder if you can remember a time when you were saying good-bye and you were leaving final instructions to your kids or the house sitter – and you wanted to really make sure they understood about the plant watering schedule or the garbage pick-up day. You may have repeated yourself, right? “Are you sure you have our emergency number” or “Did I tell you not to over water the ficus?” If you’ve been on the receiving end of these instructions, you may have been rolling your eyes by this time and wishing they’d just get going.

That wasn’t the case with the disciples and Jesus. In this account written by the author of John’s gospel, we may not have the actual words of Jesus. But I believe that as we read it through their eyes, we can hear the final farewell message with its repetition of *the* most important thing to remember about Jesus.

The prayer continues: “Abba, I’m not praying just for these disciples. I’m also praying for those who’ll believe in me through them (that’s us!) - that all may be one, as you’re in me and I’m in you; I pray that they may be one in us. I’ve given them the glory you gave me so they may be one, as we are one - I in them, you in me - that they may become perfect in unity.” I think we get the message! Jesus wants there to be unity among us.

But what is this unity? In *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, John Shelby Spong clarifies: “The desired outcome is not ecclesiastical unity, (that is to say the unity of the church), which is how this prayer has been interpreted by the church. That interpretation, that usage is always in the service of institutional power. Nor is it content or doctrinal unity, as various councils of the church have so often implied and sought to impose. It is not a unity imposed on any basis from outside the service of any agenda.

“No, the unity of which this prayer speaks is the oneness of the human with the divine that has been the constant theme of this gospel. It is the unity of the vine with the branches. It is a mystical experience of oneness - not a oneness in which individuality is lost, but a oneness in which individuality is affirmed, security is surrendered and new being is entered.”

In other words: the way in which Jesus’ followers understood Jesus is as opening up all of humanity up to a new understanding of what it means to be human. A way of being in the world that understands our origins in the One and our existence as One. And frankly, this radical expression of our humanity as being One with the divine, or seeing divinity in humanity changes everything. But most importantly, it changes the way in which we relate to God. God is no longer expressed as some far off distant supernatural being, but rather as an intimate, integral being, in which we live and move and have our being.

I'll be honest. I never got this message from John's gospel before. I always took this oneness as the call to cooperation among different Christian denominations or finding agreement among church members. John's gospel, in general, was a mystery to me. I liked some of the more esoteric aspects of it – like the opening “In the beginning was the Word.” But when I thought I had to take stories like the raising of Lazarus literally, I had major problems with John. I would have agreed with Fred Plumer's review of Bishop Spong's book. Plumer, the executive director of progressivechristianity.org wrote: “Over the years I've wondered if Christianity would have been better off if the Gospel of John had not been made part of the canon. Ever since the 4th century, this Gospel has been used to support some of the most exclusive and divisive religious creeds in history. In my opinion it has had far too much influence on the development of modern Christianity.”

But his mind was changed by Spong who wrote: “My study has convinced me, first, that the gospel of John is a deeply Jewish book, and second, that by reading it through the lens of Jewish mysticism, our generation is given new doors for understanding this gospel.”

I was thinking about the Interspiritual Wisdom event that we had back in 2010 featuring teachers from the Spiritual Paths Institute. It was unfortunate that the Christian member of the faculty was unavailable that weekend and we had to scramble to find a replacement. I say it was unfortunate because Christianity isn't well known for its mystical tradition. That's becoming less true. There has been a resurgence of interest in this part of our tradition. For instance, Julian of Norwich who in the 14th century referred to God as Mother as well as Father because she saw us as coming forth from the essence of the ONE who is the Source of all things. Even Jacob Boehme, the 16th century Lutheran wrote: “You must realize that earth unfolds its properties and powers in union with Heaven above; there is one Heart, one Being, one Will, one God, all in all.”

This was after all, the core experience of Jesus. He knew that he and his Abba were One. His whole life: divine/human, reclusive/public, teaching/listening was predicated on there being a unity - union between himself and the very Source of Life. As Julian says, our longings for God are at the heart of our being. Deep within us are holy, natural longings for oneness, primal sacred drives for union. We may live in tragic exile from these longings, or we may have spent a whole lifetime not knowing how to truly satisfy them, but they are there at the heart of our being, waiting to be born anew.

Now if you really want to delve into articulating this yearning for unity, ask the Sufis.

There is a candle in your heart, ready to be kindled.

There is a void in your soul, ready to be filled.

You feel it, don't you?

You feel the separation from the Beloved.

Invite the Beloved to fill you up, embrace the fire.

Remind those who tell you otherwise that

*Love comes to you of its own accord,
and the yearning for it cannot be learned in any school. Rumi*

And ending this separation is a major theme and primary goal of Sufi practice. Again Rumi: "In real existence there is only unity." "In things spiritual, there is no partition, no number, no individuals. How sweet is the oneness - unearth the treasure of Unity."

I believe that every religious tradition offers us all a gift. As one who's been dipping her toes into Sufi practice, I know that their gift is the acknowledgement of our longing for union with the Divine and the practice that offers a way to experience it. Actually the Gospel of Mary leads us in this direction. Cynthia Bourgeault (our missing Christian presenter) sees a much more Eastern influence in Mary, less attention to sin and more to divine unity. So this is in our tradition, too.

So I rejoiced when I read Bishop Spong's conclusion that "the call of Christ is not into religion but a new mystical oneness." Maybe we're all moving toward being "spiritual but not religious." Or maybe our religion is returning to its roots. Maybe our religion should be primarily about encouraging us in our spiritual practice, in our quest for fulfillment of our basic human longing for unity.

Not that this negates other aspects of life as a disciple. Rather, following the example of Jesus, awareness of this unity becomes the basis for everything else: for an ethic of compassion and justice, for solidarity with all of creation, for worship and praise, for every aspect of our lives in the world. This is what Jesus prayed for us.

Now the question becomes: how will we be church if our primary goal is to guide our practice of seeking union with the Divine? What supports that goal? What hinders it? I'll be honest here; I don't have answers. But it's something I think about. I've been reading a lot about the Sufi practice of *sohbet* or spiritual conversation. Kabir Helminski: "Sohbet is not sermon or lecture, but discourse, storytelling, encounter, and spiritual courtship. It is how God's lovers share and intensify their love."

I've been wondering how I might be a better facilitator of such conversations - and if others are feeling the same longing and desire for such esoteric explorations. Maybe not. I've been channeling John Lennon: "You might say I'm a mystic. But I'm not the only one. I hope some day you'll join me. And the world will be as one."

Jesus prayed, ". . . that they may be one, even as we are one."

May this be our prayer as well.

Amen

Acts 1:6-14^[SEP]

The disciples had to grow up and the Jesus movement had to flourish on its own. As Jesus “ascends” to the heavens, the disciples quite naturally gaze upward, but are then told to focus on this earth rather than heaven. Their work is here in this world. Jesus’ earthly ministry inspires their future ministries. Christ’s resurrection inspires them to commit themselves to healing the good earth. But, before they go forth to transform the world, they immerse themselves in prayer. Prayer orients us toward God’s vision and enables our actions to be grounded in divine wisdom and power.

It is written . . .

While meeting together they asked, “Has the time come, Rabbi? Are you going to restore sovereignty to Israel?”

Jesus replied, “It’s not for you to know times or dates that Abba God has decided. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.”

Having said this, Jesus was lifted up in a cloud before their eyes and taken from their sight. They were still gazing up into the heavens when two messengers dressed in white stood beside them. “You Galileans, why are you standing here looking up at the skies?” they asked. “Jesus, who has been taken from you - this same Jesus will return, in the same way you watched him go into heaven.”

The apostles returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, a mere Sabbath’s walk away. Entering the city, they went to the upstairs room where they were staying—Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James ben-Alphaeus; Simon, a member of the Zealot sect; and Judah ben-Jacob. Also in their company were some of the women who followed Jesus, his mother Mary, and some of Jesus’ sisters and brothers. With one mind, they devoted themselves to constant prayer.

The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene 9:2-7

The text resumes (4 pages are missing from the manuscript) in the middle of an account of the rise of the soul to God. Mary recounts the Savior’s revelation about the soul’s encounters with four Powers, which seek to keep it bound to the world below. In this portion, the second power, Desire, address the soul, which replies and then ascends to the next level.

It is written . . .

And Desire said, “I did not see you go down, yet now I see you go up. So why do you lie since you belong to me?”

The soul answered, “I saw *you*. You did not see me nor did you know me. You mistook the garment I wore for my true self. And you did not recognize me.”

After it had said these things, it left rejoicing greatly.

John 17:1-11

Jesus prays for our protection and well-being as individuals and communities. Studies have indicated that prayer is good medicine. In an interdependent universe, our intercessions may create a positive field around those for whom we pray, allowing positive energies to emerge in their lives and opening the door to a greater influx of divine activity. If God's presence in the world is always contextual and relational, then our prayers help create open systems that more permeable to God's visions.

It is written . . .

After Jesus said this, he looked up to heaven and said, "Abba, the hour has come! Glorify your Only Begotten that I may glorify you, through the authority you've given me over all humankind, by bestowing eternal life on all those you gave me.

And this is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent, Jesus, the Messiah. I have given you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. Now, Abba, glorify me with your own glory, the glory I had with you before the world began. I have manifested your Name to those you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me; and now they have kept your word.

Now they know that everything you've entrusted to me does indeed come from you. I entrusted to them the message you entrusted to me, and they received it. They know that I really came from you; they believe it was you who sent me. And it's for them that I pray—not for the world, but for these you've given me - for they are really yours, just as all that belongs to me is yours, and all that belongs to you is mine. It is in them that I have been glorified. I am in the world no more, but while I am coming to you, they are still in the world. Abba, holy God, protect those whom you have given me with your Name - the Name that you gave me - that they may be one, even as we are one.