

Somebody Prayed for Me

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

May 21, 2023

John 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

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. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for 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. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And 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.

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Over these last few weeks, though it is Eastertide, the lectionary has taken us to Jesus' farewell discourse - his last instructions to his disciples before his death. And today, on the last Sunday of the Eastertide season, we come to John 17, in which Jesus prays for his followers and for us.

He prays for his followers, and us.

Somebody prayed for me,
had me on their mind,
took the time to pray for me.
I'm so glad they prayed,
I'm so glad they prayed,
I'm so glad they prayed for me.¹

What does it mean when someone prays for us? It does not mean that whatever challenge we face will be magically fixed, but rather: it means we are not alone in the situation. We are seen. We are loved. We are known. The seriousness of the moment is acknowledged.

When we pray for someone, we're paying attention. We're showing up. We're willing to talk about it. We're willing to listen. We are community. When we pray for someone, we're loving them. As Rev. Sarah Griffith Lund says, when the church is asked why we do what we do, our answer is God's love.²

Rev. Carrie Bail, reflecting on Jesus' prayer for the UCC's Mental Health Sunday, writes: "It was all for the purpose of them understanding what Jesus was all about, and to be able to go on teaching it. "My life is on display in them," Jesus says, toward the end. They are the ones who will carry on this message. And what was Jesus' message? That God loves. Everyone. That God cares. For everyone. That God will be present with all who seek. With Everyone. As we try to absorb and live out that message, there are those with mental illness in our midst who will not believe it. We must do everything in our power to bring all people along with us, even those left weary by mental illness, in a unity of heart and mind."³

¹ https://hymnary.org/text/somebody_prayed_for_me_had_me_on_their_m Dorothy Norwood

² Sarah Griffith Lund made this comment to UCC students at Harvard Divinity School in the spring of 2023.

³ <https://www.mhn-ucc.org/mental-health-sunday/>, linking to https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xO6w9R2v6u6gbG8RNZV_rZgQ_hUDhvy7kgwjvNfLql0/edit

Jesus prays for his followers then and now, that we may all live out the love that he modeled.

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2 My people prayed for me,
had me on their mind,
took the time to pray for me.
I'm so glad they prayed,
I'm so glad they prayed,
I'm so glad they prayed for me.

It matters that Jesus prayed for his friends - and it matters that we pray for and care for one another. Community matters. On this Mental Health Sunday, we recall that community is a key protective factor for folks with mental health challenges.⁴

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) estimates that 1 in 5 adults, and 1 in 6 teens, deal with some form of mental illness - defined as a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, behavior or mood - in a given year.⁵ That might range from anxiety to depression, might be short term or long term. 1 in 20 experience an instance of severe mental illness. The reason I'm listing statistics is to state the obvious: a lot of us in this room deal with some form of mental health challenge - and most of us have an immediate family member or close friend who does. Normalizing our conversation about mental illness is like normalizing our conversation about diabetes or arthritis: talking about it helps us stay connected with community when we need community most, and helps us access the tools we need to live our best lives.

⁴ See, for example: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/rethink-your-way-the-good-life/202001/20-ways-protect-your-mental-health>

⁵ <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>

In this community we talk honestly about what affects our lives. This is a place we can name, and pray about, mental health and wellbeing, as well as mental illness and neurological disorders, trusting that our honesty will be met with care and compassion. Societal stigma around brain disorders and mental illness is so harmful - but our church is and should be a place where folks are not stigmatized when we face these challenges.

Sometimes I sense that people wonder if it's really true: can they speak about their challenges, their loved one's challenges? Will they be met with kindness? Will their dignity be honored? I believe, I believe so strongly that people will receive compassion and love here in this community - and I know how important it is to model that compassion. It takes practice, it takes honesty, it takes vulnerability.

Donald Capps says, "...the fundamental key to the process of healing is to testify to the role that mental illness has played in our lives and thereby free ourselves from our prisons of fear, shame and pain - and open the doors to liberated lives based on hope, healing and love."⁶

The Rev. Dr. Rachael Keefe, a UCC pastor, went through a mental health crisis in her teens. She writes about this time, in order to help others and to inspire and equip churches. Her pastor and her congregation were there for her in a time of deep need, and it made a difference:

"John, who was the associate pastor of the Federated Church of Hyannis, my childhood church, came to visit me in the emergency room....he kept coming back. I felt no judgment from him. He wanted to help. He listened and did not leave me alone. Even after I was discharged, he came to see me regularly...For years I have said that John saved my life. He was the first person who embodied Christ's love for me....It wasn't John alone who saved my life, though: it was the whole congregation...The congregation rallied to support me in the days, weeks, months and years that followed."⁷

⁶ Forward to *Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the Silence about Mental Illness, Family and Church*, by Sarah Griffith Lund. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2014.

⁷ Rachael A. Keefe, *The Lifesaving Church: Faith Communities and Suicide Prevention*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2018.

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3 My Jesus prayed for me,
had me on his mind,
took the time to pray for me.
I'm so glad he prayed,
I'm so glad he prayed,
I'm so glad he prayed for me.

It is not just the Easter moment that makes the church possible. It is not just the stone rolled away and the angels in bright raiment and the sight of the risen Christ, wounded and transformed. It is not just that. Jesus also prepares the church to go on through his prayer, his blessing. Jesus is a model of prayer in this passage. He calls on his source of love, the ultimate source of love, and asks God who is love to be there with Jesus' followers that they may continue to love, that they may live in unity, that they may go on. And the disciples hear that prayer. They hear the love poured out for them. They hear and know Jesus praying for them.

Sarah Griffith Lund reflects, "Faith is not an antidepressant...rather, faith allows us to accept the co-existence of God and suffering....I believe God exists in this messed-up world, and, in the moments of greatest pain, God is there to wipe away our tears. After all, we aren't the only ones crying. God is crying, too."⁸

O church, it is good that Christian community creates an environment that supports mental health wellness. It's so important. But it's just as important that we support folks when they struggle with mental illness. One way is to show up. One way is to hear one another's stories - "The Christian faith

⁸ *Blessed are the Crazy*, p. 75

endures because there is power in telling truthful stories.”⁹ One way is to hold people in prayer. One way is to know when to call for help - because we are not saviors. And, also - listen, this is subtle - and also it is important that we realize our congregation can't fix brain disorders. But we can pray, and listen, and name aloud what is often whispered, and love, and show up, and pray some more.

O don't we need to pray? O don't we need to be prayed for? Hallelujah I'm so glad Jesus prayed for us, and I'm so glad we can pray for each other. Amen.

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Want Resources? Need Help?

The NAMI HelpLine can be reached Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. – 10 p.m., ET.

Call 1-800-950-NAMI (6264), text "HelpLine" to 62640 or email us at helpline@nami.org

988 - The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in the United States.

UCC Mental Health Network <https://www.mhn-ucc.org/>

⁹ *Blessed are the Crazy*, p. 91.