

Psalm 1; John 17: 6-19 The Mothering God

The Book of Psalms contains expressions for a full spectrum of human experiences, from joy and hope and confidence in God, to fear and distress and lament in the face of the reality of our world. But it begins, in Psalm 1, with a declaration of happiness. It begins with an invitation for us to be the happy, blessed ones.

And yet, the psalmist describes those who are happy in terms of how they are *not like* the wicked and sinners and scoffers, by comparing what the happy do over and against what the wicked do or not do. Although our world is far from the psalmist's in time and space, living here in the valley along the river, in the high desert of New Mexico, we know very well the contrasting images of the trees planted by streams of water and the chaff the wind drives away, though for us they may be cottonwood trees along Jemez River and tumble weeds on I-25. We know the quality of life each of them represents.

The psalmist shows us the pictures of the happy and the wicked side by side. They are both in the world, side by side. So, what makes the quality of their lives so different? The happy ones, says the psalmist, delight in doing what God commands, and that's what makes them "righteous." It's not that they keep the commandments perfectly without fail, but their desire to do the will of the ever-loving God brings them into the right relationship with God. That's what being "righteous" means; being in the right relationship with God, who is the source of all love and life, the Happy thrive.

And that is just what we heard Jesus say to his followers last week. On the night of his arrest, the last chance he had to talk to his followers, Jesus told them that, when they keep his commandments to love one another, they abide in Jesus' love, just as Jesus kept God's commandments and remained in God's love, and they shall bear fruit.

With the love God loved Jesus, Jesus loved his followers, and when his followers love one another with the same love Jesus loved them, Jesus' joy will be in them, completing their joy. That is to love one another in Jesus' name, who has revealed God's name to us, the unfailing love and faithfulness.

After speaking to his followers, the one last thing Jesus did before he was handed over to the power-that-be of the world was not to give them the last-minute instructions about what they should do in Jesus' absence, but to pray. Jesus now turns his attention fully to God and prays for

his followers. Listen now to Jesus, praying to his Father on behalf of his followers whom he is about to send into the world without him. From the Gospel according to John, Chapter 17: 6-19.

‘Father, 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. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; 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.

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. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

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.

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.

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. 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. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. **The word of the Lord.**

While Jesus calls God his Father, I sense a lot of “Mothering” instinct in Jesus’ prayer here for his followers. Like a mother who devoted her life in preparing her children for the life in the world, Jesus has done all that he could to prepare them for the world. And now they are graduating, with the mission to carry on the work of God that Jesus had done in the world while with them.

I can only speak for this mother, but if what I hear from other Moms are true, the mothering instinct to protect the children is strong, even perniciously so. Even when we have done our work and it is time for the children to strike out on their own, this desire to protect often times shows up for us earthly mothers as an urge to control their lives, deciding things for them, giving them unsolicited advice, insisting on the “truth” that Mom knows best. It’s not necessarily that we don’t trust our children’s capabilities, but having been in the world longer, we don’t trust the world to be always fair or safe or good to them. We fear that even when our children offer their very best to the world, the world would let them down from time to time. And we are probably right about that.

Jesus is no hovering helicopter mother, but he, too, knew that he was sending his beloved disciples into the world that will not always be safe or welcoming to them; worse, he knew the world will be outright hostile to them. When Jesus speaks of the “world” here, he is not talking about the earth or the creation, but the world as the place of resistance and opposition to God; where the force of evil seems to have an upper hand; the world that does not know God’s love, and so incapable of loving others.

At the same time, it is the very same world that God sent Jesus to redeem, and now Jesus is sending his followers to continue his work. The world rejected the One God sent in love, Jesus, and the world will also reject the community of his followers who will challenge the way of the world.

And yet, Jesus asks God “not to take them out of the world” He asks instead “to protect them” as they work in the world, because God’s plan for this rebellious world is not to withdraw God’s love and disengage, but to engage the world and transform it by love.

So, Jesus asks God to protect the community of the faithful tasked with that mission, resting the future of the community not in their own abilities but in God’s promise. As the psalmist says in the opening Psalm, the Lord watches over the way of the righteous. Jesus prays to God, “watch over them.”

Like a mother who will not abandon her child, God nor give up on the world, no matter how hard it resists God’s loving call to return to God. Nor does Jesus retract the call to his community, the church, to continue loving and engaging the world in his name, no matter how difficult. The world may fall into chaos and be full of troubles, we see signs everywhere, but God wills to love it through all its layers of resistance by engaging the world through the community of the faithful, empowered by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Through his prayer before leaving the world, Jesus gives his community back to God, putting its future in God’s hand. At times, the wicked of the world hold such sway that we might feel nothing we do could change its course. In the face of hatred and violence, gross intolerance and ignorance, we may feel helpless and hopeless. Then we must remember, Jesus prays for us; we are ourselves the recipients of Christ’s prayer to God to protect us from the forces of opposition.

Having left home the day after I graduated from the middle school, I did not give my mother much chance for hovering even when I still had a lot of growing up to do. This was way

before email and smart phones and all other distance defying technologies. The night before my departure to the US, I remember overhearing my father ask my mother, “Do you think Takako has received our values and made them her own? Do you think she is ready to leave home?” Young and fearless, I thought I was ready to conquer the world. The following morning, before leaving for the airport, my mother led me into a room in our small apartment, closed the sliding paper door behind us, and sat us down on the tatami floor, just like the one in the Sutra Hall at the Bodhi. I’d never sat in such a formal posture at home before. Then she began to pray, entrusting my future in the world unknown to her to God’s care, asking God to protect me and guide me; in that prayer, and as a mother, she gave me back to God. And we both said, “in Jesus’ name, Amen.” That prayer did not protect me from the challenges and the pains of living in this broken world, but I know it is because of that prayer I am here today, serving God together with the community of saints, that is, the community of those who are set apart for God’s work in the world, the church.

On this Mother’s Day, let us give thanks to our Mothering God, who prays for our protection and sanctification, holding us secure in the truth of God’s unending love and mercy for the life of the world.