

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Obedience”

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### **John 17: 1-11**

*17 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, <sup>2</sup>since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup>And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup>I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup>So 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. <sup>7</sup>Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. <sup>11</sup>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.*

I tend to get a little emotional at this time of year. The school year is about to come to an end and my little girls are past another milestone along the road of life. When I consider how old they have become I suddenly am caught up in a wave of sadness that reminds me those early years are forever gone. I get a little anxious thinking about what might come next and all the unknowns of the future. At the same time I yearn for the safety and security of a much simpler time when all of us were younger. Maren’s graduation from college was a stark reminder that my babies are not long for the comfort and protection of a father-controlled world. I think that graduations are almost the equivalent of dropping your child off at kindergarten on that first day all over again. It is hard to walk out the door and leave them behind. Ready or not- your child is suddenly part of the real world. Is she ready? Is she going to be OK?

The Scripture lesson this morning comes from a time like that, a time of a fearful end and a new beginning. It is part of Jesus’ final discourse according to the gospel of John. Jesus is preparing to leave behind his disciples. He is about to leave them “in the world” and perhaps wonders if they will be up to the demands of faith that he has attempted to teach them in their time together. And so Jesus, in worry and uncertainty and in love, turns his heart to heaven and begins to pray.

Now I have always thought that having someone pray for me is a good thing. It shows that they care. It shows that their thoughts and feelings are directed toward my concern. So it is a good thing that as he approaches the end of his earthly association with his friends that Jesus prays for them and for those of us who follow. He intercedes on the behalf of those he loves and who must now go out into the world to be his people. He prays that his action and the actions of those who would follow him might complete God’s purpose and serve to glorify God.

He prays for deeper obedience and for protection from anything that would draw him and his followers away from God.

According to the *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, the word translated in this passage as glory comes from a Hebrew root word for “weight” or “importance.” To glorify God therefore meant to give the intention of God importance, meaning, honor, and weight in the words and actions of your life. Glorifying God was being obedient to the purpose of God for your life. For Jesus, glorifying God meant obedience to the path of the cross. For his disciples, glorifying God means willful and humble obedience to those things which serve God and others, not our own comfort and security.

Obedience. We normally think of obeying as doing exactly what we are told. In the past few weeks Laura has been struggling training our two dogs Garbo and Sweetie, how to obey commands for sit and stay. She holds a couple of treats in front of them. She gets them to sit in one place, relatively motionless. She tells them to stay, a difficult thing for the dogs as they anticipate such a wonderful reward. Then she walks away around the stairs, offering them several stern reminders to stay. But by the time she reappears before her beloved dogs, they have gotten up and starting walking toward her with their tails wagging enthusiastically. Laura will try again and again, but the dogs usually end up getting a treat without completely obeying.

Yet obedience to glorify God is not merely following God’s orders or commands. Jesus prayed for something more complex and more meaningful for his followers. He prayed for obedience to provide us purpose. When Jesus prays for us we get the idea that our purpose is not defined by how good we look, how much money we have in our wallet, our how many awards we have won with our talent and wisdom. Jesus understood that only through seeking the intention of God would we find our reason for being in the world.

I read a story years ago about former Dallas Cowboys’ quarterback Roger Staubach. Staubach won the Heisman Trophy at the Naval Academy and was widely known as an outstanding leader “with a genius mind” through his military service. But when he joined the Cowboys, then Coach Tom Landry refused to let Staubach call his own plays. The quarterback was peeved and deemed such strict coaching to be outdated and an insult to his skill and his idea of the purpose of the game. The team floundered as the coach and quarterback struggled to find common ground. Finally Staubach said that he began to learn the value of obedience. He learned that there was importance in his compliance with carefully designed team plays and even in the example of the quarterback faithfully sacrificing to be “part of the team.” Through obedience, Staubach said, he learned “harmony, fulfillment, and victory.”

Jesus prays that we might glorify God through our obedience. In faithfully seeking God’s intention we find out just who we were created to be. It is not obedience to a way that shackles us to a meaningless past but obedience that creates what is needed for a blessed future. God’s purpose becomes our purpose when we seek God’s objectives in our actions.

As Jesus prayed for obedience in his followers, he was praying for protection for those left behind. Much as obedience to warnings about crossing the street at a safe place or staying away from thin ice or seeking shelter in the event of a severe storm, obedience is an action of faith that can keep us safe from threats of destruction. Obedience protects us. Certainly Jesus must have anticipated something of what he was to encounter in Jerusalem during the last week of his life. He was worried about the threats and dangers lurking. Certainly there were dangers enough in the world to be obvious threats to the lives of his disciples. The earliest years of the church would be ones that were full of persecution and suffering. Perhaps we don’t fear such darkness today. Perhaps we don’t see the value of obedience to God for our own well-being.

William Willimon writes that we all need to understand the evil from which we need protecting. It may not be persecution from a king or an emperor. It may not be the threat of physical harm or verbal slander. It may not be the evil of a devil dressed in red pajamas, with horns and a pointed tail. But the threat of evil is still there and very present. There is harm in the not-so-subtle voice that tells us that our worth is to be measured in our human success.

There is danger in the whisper that convinces us that we have nothing to offer God and that God has nothing to offer us. There is a threat in the boast that our security can be found in money or weapons or power. There is peril in the idea that forgiving others and loving your enemies is foolish and a sign of weakness. There is risk in the lie that change in the world isn't really possible and it is better to develop a covering of indifference and apathy. "Jesus' prayer for protection may have been more about protecting us from our own brokenness and inclination toward self-focus as it is about protecting us from external harm." Jesus prayed that we would be protected from such evil and that the work of the Kingdom of God would continue through our obedient work in our world.

My daughter Maren, recent college graduate, sent me an article from *The New York Times* written by columnist David Brooks. The article speaks of the anxiety we parents hold while sending graduates off into the world today, with a bad job market and a mountainous federal debt. He says this is a group whose lives have been the most structured and supervised ever, but who now enter a world that is unprecedentedly wide open and unstructured. These graduates will not fall into the so-called normal patterns and choices. They will not be able to follow the baby-boomer theology of: "follow your passion, chart your own course, march to the beat of your own drummer, follow your dreams and find yourself." Today's graduates are called by problems and then form their self gradually by their calling. Today's graduates must understand that admiration does not come from being happy but from tough choices that cost personally yet promote what is good. And finally today's graduates must learn that the self is not the center of life. The purpose of life may not be in finding yourself but in losing yourself. It is the tasks of life that are most important, things that engage others and make a contribution. In essence, Brooks writes, "It's not about you."

Perhaps this is akin to the understanding that Jesus wishes to leave for all of us as we live our lives without his physical presence yet serving him with the promise of God's Spirit. Life is not about our glory but about glorifying God. We are in the world so that God might be glorified through us. We best glorify God not through blind subservience to rules and worldly expectations, but obedience to faithfully seek God's intention, obedience to remind us who we were created to be, obedience to protect us from that worldly success and self-love that tempts us to be something less than our divine potential, obedience that enlightens us to who it is we really serve.