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May 24, 2009

Plymouth Congregational UCC

Intimate Love  
John 17:1-3, 6-11, 20-26

Many of you know that I spent last week in eastern Pennsylvania helping my parents around the house with all kinds of mundane tasks following my mother's foot surgery. Twice during my stay, there was a frost advisory in their part of the state.

Having *not* inherited my parents' green thumbs, I dutifully but *half-heartedly* trudged out to the garden with my father to cover the vulnerable new growth of his beloved peppers and tomatoes.

My father is a quiet man – he always has been. He's not the type to ask a lot of questions about your life, nor to share stories of his own. So as we headed out to work, I knew not to expect a lot of conversation.

When we reached the garden, he gently instructed me, in his slow southern accent, on how to prepare for the frost: we took some old, cracked flowerpots and turned them upside-down over each plant; and then, picking up mostly-dried tufts of mulched grass clippings, carefully placed them over the exposed drain holes on the flowerpots.

Sure enough, once he was done explaining the process, we worked along in silence.

When finished, we stood side-by-side to survey the whole of the garden. And to my surprise, he started talking. He pointed down to the far end, where he'd indicated we needn't worry about frost affecting the more hearty produce, and he began, "Did you see my peas coming up over there?"

He worked his way over, row by row – potatoes to lettuce to cucumbers and cabbage – commenting on each venture and his expectations of their return. I couldn't quite follow all of it, not being a gardener myself, but I could feel his quiet passion; the sense that this was *his* earth that he'd loved by the work of his body; the challenges he'd faced and the hopes he had. We communed in this way for a short while, and then we turned and headed back to the house.

My father and I aren't very much alike at all – from green thumbs to literary preferences to temperaments. Yet he is mine and I am his. And in those garden moments, he shared with me deep parts of himself – as foreign to my own experiences as they may be. He shared so that I might know that this father loves his child, and he wants his child to *know* him.

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This is the image that came to my mind this week when I read Jesus' prayer to *his* Father. That intimate, loving relationship he shared with God – so close that he named God Abba, Daddy; so intimate that he desperately wants his own followers to know that same relationship – Oneness – with this God he loves so much.

I describe Jesus as fervently desiring this because, when we read his prayer in John's Gospel, he is so passionate that it's barely coherent. It's repetitive: "All mine are yours, and yours are mine....Holy Father, protect them...so that they may be one as we are one....not only for these, but for those who *will* know me through their word, that *they* may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us....so that they may be one as we are one, I in you and you in me, that they may become completely one".

How desperate the prayer seems, as if Jesus is not certain that he's quite hitting the full meaning of what he intends but wants to be sure to get his thoughts across fully.

And it's passionate – it's a plea of utter love both for his God and his followers.

Jesus prays for us to know that oneness, that intimate relationship that he has with God and all. This depth of knowing is what Jesus, here, calls eternal life: "this is eternal life: that they may know you".

How do we *know* God? Not "know about" as in facts and formulas; but know intimately, relationally. God is so foreign to us – so OTHER from all that we know that the closest we come is through incomplete metaphors:

God is close to us as Father and Mother and Friend;

God is mysterious as Spirit and Breath and Energy;

God is strength for us as Rock and Love and Fortress.

God is all of these and beyond anything we imagine – so how can we *know* God as we know others with whom we have relationships?

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I know some of you are familiar with the internet-based community called Facebook. Facebook is a way to keep up with friends' lives, share information and engage conversation – it's also an excellent way to escape "the real world" for a little while by playing on the world wide web.

While at my parents' house last week, I spent more time than usual conversing with friends on Facebook. And I came across one of the recent quizzes that has been passed around. It's entitled "*How well do you know me [insert your name here]?*" The point is for each person to create your own personalized multiple-choice questionnaire:

What's my middle name?

Who is my favorite artist?

Name my favorite pizza topping.

Friends from all over can then take the quiz and see how well they know one another.

I found it amusing when Jamie, my spouse, expressed playful annoyance when she only scored 75% on my quiz. After 9 years together, she wondered how it could be that she doesn't know every little fact about me?

But that's just it. The questions on the quiz were facts – and that's not how the most personal relationships work. Jesus wasn't sharing with the disciples God's favorite pizza topping or anything else he knew *about* God. He was sharing his connection, his oneness

with God – and how that relationship was about love: “I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have *loved them* even as you have *loved me*”.

Knowing God is not about having the right facts;  
it's about relationship.

This experiential relationship with God is what we try to cultivate in our weekly worship practices: in music, scripture study, silence and fellowship. We purposefully come together, in community, to strive for a continuity of relationship with the One who has called us. We *show up*, offer our presence – which in itself is a huge part of relationship.

And yet we sometimes can feel that God is still so unfamiliar, as if it's impossible to fully come to know her. God is so OTHER that every time we seem to get close, we find we're even further from knowing that oneness.

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Early this past Friday morning, in mist and fog, a friend and I visited the labyrinth that sits in an artist's open field just north of town. And while I walked its looping folds, as convoluted as Jesus' prayer this morning, I was contemplating just how we reach this oneness that Jesus describes as relationship with God.

If you've ever walked a labyrinth, you know that there are points when you seem so close to its center – when you are literally just inches outside the desired destination –  
and then you turn one corner,  
and you're taken further out,  
and then further away again,  
until you're once more on the very outer edge of the circuit,  
as far from the center as you can possibly get  
while still remaining on the path...  
and yet, in actuality you're closer to the goal:  
you've come nearer to reaching  
the center of the labyrinth.

Relationships are like that. Especially, I believe, relationship with God. There is no direct path, no easy route. Sometimes it seems you've shown up, offered so much of yourself and are getting really close to truly knowing him. And then the path turns, and you find yourself questioning, wondering if you're really close at all.

And still Jesus prays for us. *Passionately*. Knowing that we will sometimes feel like we aren't connected at all, he repeats himself over and over: “help them know that they are one, as we are one – I in them and you in me”.

Here in this passage he even models for us the *how* of returning to knowledge of God and this oneness. Prayer. Could it really be that simple?

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In his book *To Know As We Are Known*, Parker Palmer defines prayer as “the practice of relatedness”. He says,

“On one side, prayer is our capacity to enter into that vast community of life in which self and other, human and nonhuman, visible and invisible, are intricately intertwined....On the other side, prayer means opening myself to the fact that as I reach for that connecting center, the center is reaching for me. As I move toward the heart of reality, reality is moving toward my heart. As I recollect the unity of life, life is recollecting me in my original wholeness. In prayer, I not only address the love at the core of all things; I listen as that love addresses me, calling me out of isolation and self-centeredness into community and compassion. In prayer, I begin to realize that I not only know but am known”<sup>i</sup>.

Relationships aren't easy. Knowing another takes work – whether it's a spouse or a friend or a parent... or God. We have to be present to a relationship. We have to “practice relatedness” with God.

Jesus prayed for us that we might seek to know God as intimately as he did – as closely as a Father. Sometimes it means stepping out of our own preferred ways of relating, like a new practice of prayer; or like going out to the garden with my own father, and working side-by-side in silence, knowing that this is *his* way, and *his* joy; and knowing that we *can* be one without words to understand.

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At the end of the service today, Jan Welch will be offering her ministry of music to Plymouth for the last time. Some of us experience prayer and relationship with God through the gift of music. So I invite you to remain seated during the Postlude, and open yourself to utterly *being* with God through the practice of Jan's musical prayer. It's one way of coming to know our oneness.

Jesus said, *this is eternal life: that we may know God, that we may be one*. May we offer ourselves fully to that relationship. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) p. 11.