

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Come Together: Into the Mix”

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John 17:20-24

January 8, 2023

Today we begin a new series called “Come Together.” As we start a new year, something that our Session has recognized anew is a need to reclaim a somewhat straightforward, maybe even obvious core component of a life of faith: connection, and fellowship. It’s at the heart of what it means to *be* the church, of our calling, commissioned by Christ. It’s not merely a place “to be fed,” it’s not merely a provider of spiritual services, so to speak. It’s something else, something more. The very word for church means an assembly, a gathering, of a group of people called out, to be beyond themselves as individuals. And that’s something that perhaps we’ve lost focus on.

So for the next few weeks, we’ll see a few ways that Scripture talks about spiritual fellowship, how Christ himself calls us into it, the challenges of it, but more importantly our inseparable need for it, and as we’ll see today in a passage in the Gospel of John, we’re talking about more than just some sociological trait of human beings. We’re talking about the very nature of God. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

²⁰ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴ “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

John 17:20-24

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Years ago in preaching class we were presented with a bit of a quandary. This was Preaching 101—they didn’t actually call it that, but that’s essentially what it is.

In one assignment, each person was given the same Scripture passage on which to deliver a short sermon to the group the next week. And when the day came, each person had their turn to go up in front of the group and offer a brief homily interpreting the same passage.

On the record, every offering and faithful interpretation of Scripture should be cherished as God's Word to us. Off the record, I suspect there's a particular circle of hell featuring a never-ending series of sermons given by first-time preaching students all about the same thing. Needless to say, by sermon #3 or 4, eyes start to glaze over, and this is with our friends up there.

But then one person did something different. One student, really an acquaintance of mine, had been leading a ministry in a setting called Second Life. Second Life was/is an online virtual world, in which you create your own avatar, a self-selected representation of yourself. And with that avatar you could explore this virtual world, interact with other users, that sort of thing. It started about twenty years ago, grew rapidly, and was about at its peak when this was happening.

But this student had actually founded a church within Second Life. On this online platform, there was a virtual church building. And on a regular basis, various users would guide their avatars into the virtual church building and interact with each other. There was a schedule for things like Bible Studies, worship services, even potlucks—I still don't quite know how the potlucks were supposed to happen, but they had them.

And the student, for his sermon in this Preaching 101 class, was going to offer an example of what he did every Sunday morning for his church in Second Life, as part of his virtual worship experience.

They had to put together a whole other setup to make it happen since he wasn't exactly going to stand up at a podium in front of us. We went into one of the larger classrooms that had an AV room, a screen, a sound system, and all of that. And on the screen they projected the feed from the worship service at this Second Life Church, and the student didn't actually stand up in front of us. He stepped into the small AV room to the side, preached the sermon from in there, while we watched his preacher avatar on the screen.

I'm sure technology has advanced since then, but honestly, I tried to keep myself from snickering the whole time. It was probably a pretty good sermon, unfortunately, but all I could notice was that his avatar just made the same robotic hand motions over and over again, no matter what he was saying. Until the very end, as he was reaching the inspiring conclusion to his sermon, his avatar changed things up and lifted his virtual hands high above his head in a stirring call to action, after which everyone promptly signed off.

The group in the room offered our critiques afterward—this was after the student emerged from the AV room. But inevitably the professor turned the discussion not about the sermon, but

about the premise of the sermon. It begged a few questions: to what degree was his sermon a legitimate sermon? To what degree was his church a legitimate church? And, whew, you want to get some seminarians fired up, you don't need to ask them about predestination or infallibility. Just ask them about whether virtual church is still church.

Questions like, how can it be preaching if it's just someone you watch on a screen? To which others would ask, "Well don't all these megachurches just stream the preacher from one location to another?" Why aren't all the users or residents being encouraged to go to a "real" church? Well, it seems many of them have such social anxiety or trauma from "real" churches that this format was the only one they'd even cross the virtual threshold of. How can people be their true selves if you get to just pick your own avatar and presentation? Well, isn't that what people do anyway on Sunday mornings, put on a front?

And then the big one. Can it be a church, if you're not actually gathered together? Now that one was loaded.

Fortunately, those questions of digital church and virtual fellowship were just a theoretical exercise, and we haven't had to deal with any of that over the past few years...

The notions of unity, of fellowship, of connection aren't just abstract buzzwords in the Christian life. They are central to an understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. Too many times, and I think this is especially true in the church in the United States, we place our individual relationship with God, with Jesus, our individual faith journeys as being of higher importance, perhaps *the* highest importance, what *I* get out of it, how *I* am being fed, and too many times we do so to the point that the need for others on the same journey, even though we'd say it's important, kind of gets shuffled off to the side when push comes to shove.

If you had any doubt about that, witness this passage in the Gospel of John. We come to John's Gospel in the 17th chapter as part of a prayer Jesus is offering on behalf of his disciples. This is all being prayed at the Last Supper with his disciples around him, and Jesus is praying for them for the time when he would not physically be with them anymore. It's really kind of heartwarming. We sometimes forget the closeness that Jesus had forged with these disciples. So it's no surprise that when he prays for them, he doesn't pray for them to be great evangelists or brilliant theologians. Instead, he prays for their protection, and he prays for their unity.

It's that unity that I'd like us to focus on in particular today, because the sort of unity, the sort of connection that Jesus is talking about here isn't just your run-of-the-mill thing. Something else is going on.

Two points I'd offer you, aspects of Jesus' prayer that we can read quickly and perhaps miss the amazing impact of what Jesus is claiming here.

First, he prays that their unity would send a signal. Picking up in v. 23, “that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” He’s praying that the disciples would be so unified, so connected that their very connectedness would testify, what, that they really loved each other? No. It’s more than that. That their very connectedness would testify that God sent Jesus, that God loves them as he loves Christ himself.

That’s the sort of thing that sounds nice to say, but when you think about it, it’s downright jaw-dropping: Jesus is praying for a level of unity and cohesion among his followers that that cohesion would point not to their own relationships, but to him, to his mission, to the very love of God.

Second, he prays that the unity they would have would be the very same unity that Jesus has with the Father. This is another one that’s easy to say but blows your mind when you think about it. V. 21: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Think about what that’s saying for a moment. Jesus is invoking the very communion shared between God the Father and God the Son. If we have any theologians among us, you may be picking up on some Trinitarian notes here. The unity of Jesus with the Father and, by extension, with the Spirit is a bedrock doctrine of the Christian faith: one God, three persons. It has boggled theologians for centuries and can still short-circuit the brain to try to think about it. How can God be three yet also one? That’s a heavier topic for another day, but something a bit more straightforward that can be said is that at his root, at the root of how God has chosen to reveal himself to us, God exists in fellowship. The Trinity itself, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is at its core a divine existence and revelation of unity and connection.

That’s amazing enough, but then here’s the part that blows my mind. Jesus is praying that the very unity that exists between him and the Father, that is, the communion of the Trinity itself, would be the unity that dwells among those who follow him.

Have you ever thought about the church in that way, about fellowship that way? I mean, being with other people is a good thing and all, but have you ever thought in the very act of assembling as the church, our Lord is praying that what binds us together would be nothing short of the very bonds of the triune God? That Jesus is inviting us into the mix with God the Father and God the Spirit?

That at once is an encouragement to me—you know, that’s pretty cool, this thing that we’re called into. But then on the other, it’s a sobering challenge. Because, are we really comfortable claiming that about ourselves?

Is the level of unity within the church such that testifies to the unity of God? By “church” you can take this on a really large scope to entail the broader unity of the global church. Can we say the church’s unity testifies to the unity of God, to the Trinity, what with 30,000 different denominations and networks and one schism after another? That’s a whole other topic.

But even on a smaller scale, on the scale of a single congregation, does the level of connection, of fellowship, of unity within a congregation, within our congregation testify to the very nature of God?

This matter is something that our Session has recognized that perhaps we are not as connected as we would like to think, that we’ve gotten away from it. Or maybe it’s right there in front of our faces, but we haven’t been willing to do something about it. Are we connected to each other? And not just connected, but connected in such a way that testifies to the very unity of God? If we’re not, what could it look like if we were?

Over the past week, headlines have been dominated by news and updates about Buffalo Bills’ safety Damar Hamlin. If you weren’t familiar with what happened, last week during a game, Hamlin suffered a cardiac arrest after a tackle, collapsed, and had to be administered CPR there on the field until he could be taken to the hospital. Thankfully, it seems he’s now in stable condition with indications that no serious neurological damage had occurred.

But when it happened, and throughout the past week, we’ve seen powerful displays of solidarity. Among his own teammates you saw it, but you kind of expect that right? But you also saw it elsewhere. In the locker rooms while the game was delayed, the captains of the Cincinnati Bengals—the team the Bills were playing—went to the Bills’ locker room to check on the team grappling with the possible loss of a teammate. This was their opponent, mind you.

Then there was a player named Rodney Thomas, a defensive back for the Indianapolis Colts who incidentally played high school ball with Hamlin in Pittsburgh. When he heard about his friend’s collapse, he immediately got in his car, and drove the 100 miles to Cincinnati to be by his side in the hospital.

Lots of other stories about the solidarity throughout the NFL and broader sporting world. It’s inspiring, it’s uplifting, to witness the sort of connection felt among these players, even players on opposing teams, players that hadn’t necessarily been with each other.

But would anyone say, “Yeah, that points to God”?

That's the challenge, the powerful promise that Jesus sets before us. Humanity is capable of incredible, inspiring connections, and that's not a bad thing. Teams, foxholes, families, you name it. But the unity of the church should point to something even more. The very love and unity of God.

Because think about it, if a church is connected in a way, maybe even in a good way, but in a way that's about on par with most any other close group of people, of friends, of teammates, what exactly does it point to besides just another group of likeminded people?

What Jesus is praying for here is a level of connection so intimate, so powerful, that the only explanation for it for those who witness it is something not of this world. Is that what we seek? Is that what you seek?

The good news is that God is never done drawing us in, even in seasons when we might have indulged a bit too much convenience, a bit too much on our own, but God is always drawing us in, into his life, into his church, and into the glorious shared life of the gospel.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.