

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“A Prayer Overheard: That They May Be One”

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John 17:20-23

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Next week we'll wrap up our Lenten look at Christ's prayer in John 17, what is in fact the longest instance of Christ's recorded prayer in the Gospels, offered up to God in front of his disciples at the Last Supper. The fact that this takes place at the Last Supper has a bit of added umph to what we'll look at next week on Palm Sunday, when we consider not just Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem but also the fickleness of the crowd—and our own—that led to his crucifixion just a few days later. It is for those followers, those disciples, who would end up betraying him and deserting him, that he offers this prayer. It's not for those who are faithful to the end, who stuck by him through thick and thin, but for the betrayers, the deserters that Christ prays. I hope that might come as a comfort for us as we wrap up next week heading into Holy Week.

Today, we come to what might be considered the heart of the prayer, the part with some of the most mind-bending, challenging implications, with all of it connected to a seemingly simple notion: unity.

Let's go to God's Word together.

[Read passage, John 17:20-23.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, soothe and convict us by your Word this morning. May this Word both be a comfort if we feel alone and also a challenge when we feel we are too quick to write off your vision for your followers. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Surely Jesus could have come up with something easier we could all get behind, something that truly unites us. He's alluded to unity and for his hope, his prayer for unity among his followers a couple of times before this point, but here he gets his most direct in talking about it. So, I wonder why he couldn't have figured out something easier to get everyone on board.

Something like bubble wrap. It's a simple shared experience, but one that brings everyone together. You know what I'm talking about. The packing material placed around something kind of fragile. It's good. But its usefulness in packing stuff up isn't what I mean. It's what happens after you unpack the box and you have all this bubble wrap now with no clear purpose.

So what do we do? Come on, admit it. It's not just for kids. You take it out, and you pop a few bubbles. It's soothing. It's enjoyable. Everyone does it. And if they don't, they're missing out on a wonderful, unifying shared experience.

That is something folks could get behind, something that would truly unite people.

But what Jesus holds in his heart is something far grander...and more challenging.

The first big point is that Jesus expands the scope drastically of just who he's praying for. We've gone into this prayer with the assumption that Jesus isn't just praying for his disciples who were physically present there and then at the Last Supper, but this is the reason why that assumption is more than safe.

V. 20 says, "I ask not only on behalf of these [that is, the disciples with him at the moment], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word." Doesn't take long to realize he's talking about nothing short of the entire church: those who would come to believe in the generations to come based on the word and ministry the disciples would carry on.

And for what does he pray for these generations of disciples, for the entirety of the church? Their unity. The very next phrase: "that they may all be one."

Now we might be tempted to limit that to some kind of vague "unity of purpose" or a loose sense of connection among disciples of all stripes. We're all on the same team, of course, but you do your thing, we do our thing, and kind of leave it at that.

But Jesus doesn't leave that option open to us.

He clarifies, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us," and then in the next verse, "so that they may be one, as we are one."

This is remarkable. Jesus is praying for the very union that exists between the Father and the Son, the union of God himself, to be the very bond into which Jesus' disciples are brought. It means this is not some loose sense of connection. The unity of God himself, the communion of the Trinity, by extension, is precisely what the church is invited into.

Why would that, of all things, be so important that this is what he singles out?

That connection, that connection of the need for God's protection, which Pastor Mark shared about last week, in a hostile world and being drawn into communion, into unity, together brings us to a central point underlying the very notion of Christian community: that if we are following Jesus, truly following Jesus, the world will not be a welcome place to us, but still we are called to go into it, and that is something we can't do on our own; we need each other's support, and we need the protection and guidance of God.

But there's an added twist to the purpose of that protection, to the purpose of that unity.

If you are here today and you're a bit skeptical about this whole church thing, you might be thinking to yourself, "Hold on a second, preacher. You're saying that one of the chief purposes of the church is to protect itself. What genius came up with that idea?" One could be tempted to see it that way.

But that's not the reason Jesus prays for his disciples' protection and unity, that is, just to serve their own interests. Starting in v. 22, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, 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." Here Jesus gives us the reason he prays for his disciples' unity. It's not so that they could all get along. It's not so that they would grow closer together. It is, as v. 23 reads, "so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." The very purpose of the disciples' unity is to serve as further confirmation to the world that Jesus was indeed sent by the Father and as testimony to the Father's love.

Somehow, this is the purpose of the church's very act of gathering, the very act of fellowship, that that gathering would be a sign unto the world that a different power was at work within it. In a world in which people will endlessly self-select and divide according to preference or class or race or politics or nationality, the church is to say, "Though we are different, though we disagree, though we do not always get along perfectly, we will not break fellowship with one another. And that's not because we're just so nice, and that's not because differences don't matter, but it's because we are bound together by something far greater than any difference, than any preference, than any race, than any politics, than any nationality. We are bound by the very union that dwells between Jesus Christ and the Father in heaven, and by those ties, we are called to be a testimony to the world that the way of endless division and conflict is not the way it has to be." That is the purpose of the church's act of gathering: to be a sign of unity in divided times.

So how are we doing in that regard?

Ever hear of a congregation splitting, whether because of a theological disagreement or split loyalty between leaders or contention over the direction of the church? Not that uncommon is it. Ever hear of two or more congregations being in implicit or explicit competition against each other, engaged in battle over membership and offering dollars? Sadly all too often. Ever hear of two pastors or theologians attacking each other with a level of vitriol and lack of charity you thought only reserved for politicians? Happens all the time.

If you think we're getting off scott-free just because you can't think of any of those things happening around here recently, take a moment and flip to the front of your bulletin. What is the name of this congregation? Sequoyah Hills *Presbyterian* Church. I've been a Presbyterian most of my life. It's a theological heritage I am proud of. But no matter how proud I am, or how proud another is of Methodist or Baptist or Catholic heritage, we all have to come to grips with the fact, the fact without exception, that every different label, every different denomination, and there are over 30,000 of them now, every single one came about when one group of Christians said to another group of Christians, "We will not remain in fellowship with you."

Or, there's the danger of seeing the church down the street not as partners in shared mission, not as co-workers in making known the love of God in Christ Jesus, but as competitors, all seeking after what is thought to be a limited pool of potential members and their giving. With increasing pressure on dwindling membership in many congregations, it means increased suspicion of so-called "sheep stealing" and the temptation to circle the wagons, protect what you consider to be yours, and neglect the outward, missional calling of the unified church. Anybody ever felt that sort of thing?

Division within the church is so common it feels normal, and that's the dangerous part, because we let ourselves think it's okay. But if for a moment we take seriously the prayer of Jesus for his disciples, "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," we will quickly recognize that the church as we see it today does not come anywhere near the unity to which our Lord has called us and for which our Lord has prayed, and that should break our hearts.

What then are we to do? How are we supposed to embrace and embody the unity for which our Lord prayed? I'm afraid that one little sermon isn't going to do the trick. And it's not just congregations, it's clergy too, in fact we clergy might be more guilty of territoriality and competition

Years ago I remember meeting with Bill Barron, and among the many wise things he shared with me, it was something he had personally found quite challenging in his years of ministry and leadership. He said, "It's really hard to get clergy to work together," and that is just indicting.

But we can start by truly recognizing each other here as children of God, as ones for whom Christ died, with whom Christ calls us to unity.

And we can continue by recognizing those who gather around the corner on Kingston Pike, or downtown, or further west, north, or south, recognizing them indeed as children of God, as ones for whom Christ died, with whom Christ calls us to unity.

We've been blessed with glimpses of this already.

In 1947, a movement emerged in South India, where various Protestant denominations had already been established through missionary work in centuries prior. The movement, following India's independence, effectively united the Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, and Congregational churches in the region under one banner. Some might recognize the person who was appointed one of the first bishops, a priest named Lesslie Newbigin.

There were fits and starts, challenges as to what would be done about this or that issue. But they found a way to work together not just loosely, but closely, tangibly.

Now you might be thinking, well okay the Presbyterians and the Methodists and the Anglicans, but what about the Roman Catholics, or maybe if there were any Eastern Orthodox churches in the area too? Very good point. And yes, every instance of entrenched schism I believe breaks the Lord's heart for his church.

But while every other movement, it seems, every other impulse is driving us to self-select, to go first by what our preferences are, to polarize and divide according to this or that social, political, or theological conviction, here was an example of the church saying, "Enough," and taking a substantive step back towards the kind of unity for which our Lord prays.

At its inception, the Church of South India on its emblem included a few words from Scripture. It was from this passage: "That they all may be one."

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