

“Jesus Prays for You”

John 17:20-26

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More Than Being “One”

If you've heard someone preach or teach on this part of John 17, there's a decent chance it was connected with the idea of Christians getting along within the church, or churches cooperating with one another. There's a good reason for that. The church has struggled with unity for a long time now. For the first thousand years of its history, the church stayed pretty well connected. The next thousand years was marked by churches splitting apart from one another and an ever-growing number of Christian denominations. In the mid-20th century, a movement started that was designed to get Christians back together and reverse that trend, so that “they all would be one.” (John 17:21) That's where our denomination, the *United Church of Christ*, comes from.

As a general rule, I like what happens when we take that phrase, “that they all may be one” and let it lead us to greater cooperation and peace and unity. When I don the hat of being Corinth's “missions pastor,” I do a lot of work connecting individuals and organizations and churches, and trying to get them working toward common goals in productive, unified ways. I'm convinced that if Christians within the church had a deeper unity and churches across denominational and cultural and social divisions were more united, we could do some earth-shaking things for the Kingdom of God. And on top of that, I'm pretty sure it makes Jesus happy when he sees his children getting along.

But this morning, I'm not going to talk about how we all should get along. I'm not going to give you a “Church Unity for Dummies” lesson or “How to Get Along in 5 Easy Steps.” The reason I'm not going to do that is because Jesus doesn't do that. If what you're thinking about right now is someone you're having a disagreement with, or how people in Corinth could get along better, or how Corinth could partner more with other churches, I want you to try to bracket those things and set them aside. Those things are important. I would love for you to not have conflict in your life. I don't want division within our church, and I certainly don't want us to pull away from other believers. But those might be issues for another day. I don't think any of that is what Jesus has in mind when he prays this prayer. That begs the question, “If we're not talking about “being one” or getting along with one another, what *are* we talking about?”

The Prayer Jesus Prays

Let's start with Jesus' prayer. You may have noticed that this passage is a bit of a tongue-twister. When I read a passage like this (not out loud, just looking at words on paper), I tend to skip over repeated words after I've seen them two or three times. When I hear a passage like this read to me, the only thing I can focus on are the repeated words, and I lose track of how they're connected to each other. But when I speak the passage, I'm forced to think about and engage each word - not skipping some or fixating on others. On the off chance that I'm not the only person who is wired that way, I want to invite you to do something that we don't often do here at Corinth. I'd like you to read this passage out loud:

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. ²⁵ Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

To understand Jesus' prayer and to figure out what it means for our lives today, we need to start with the context. This can be easy to miss if you're reading straight through the gospel, but it's even easier to miss when you only get a couple verses each Sunday, and we skip over whole chapters between Sundays!

The big important thing that is so easy to miss is that today marks our fourth week in a row looking at the events of one dinner on one night in one room. The Gospel of John covers a lot of ground in the first 12 chapters, but it really pumps the brakes when we get to chapter 13, which begins a section called the "Upper Room Discourse." From chapter 13 all the way through chapter 17, Jesus and the disciples are celebrating a traditional Jewish Passover meal together. In chapter 13, Jesus washed his disciples' feet (March 13 sermon) and predicted his betrayal and Peter's denial. In chapter 14, he encouraged his disciples and told them that he is "the way and the truth and the life" (14:6). He talked about leaving the disciples, but promised to send the Holy Spirit (14:16). In chapter 15, he compared himself to a vine, and the disciples to branches and told them to abide in him (March 20 sermon). He reminded them that they were chosen (15:19). In chapter 16, he told them more about what the Holy Spirit would do when he came (March 27 sermon). He predicted his betrayal again, but noted that he would not be alone, because his Father would be with him (16:32). He ends chapter 16 by saying

to the disciples, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (16:33)

And then, after talking about all those things over dinner, Jesus turns his attention from talking to the disciples to talking to God. The disciples are still in the room, but Jesus is no longer engaging them directly. He’s talking to God, and the disciples get to overhear his prayer. Chapter 17 is one long prayer from Jesus that stands right between a Passover meal with his disciples, and his arrest, which we know will lead to his crucifixion and death within a matter of hours. As he prays, Jesus knows that he’s standing in the gap between the “normal” life he and his disciples have known and a radically different kind of “new normal” that his disciples can’t yet imagine.

How Jesus Prays

Jesus begins, “my prayer is not for them alone.” (20a) In the previous verses, he prayed for his disciples who were gathered around the table eating the Passover meal with him. Now, he is expanding his prayer. “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” (20b) This sentence marks a big shift in what we know about the disciples. Until this point, they have been with Jesus as he has been teaching and healing and performing miracles, but they haven’t been doing any teaching or preaching of their own. Now Jesus says that people will believe in him through the disciples’ message. We learn in verse 20 that the disciples have a mission and it will be a success. Jesus doesn’t pray that people will believe, but for the people who will believe.

His prayer for the believers is “that all of them may be one,” which is that phrase that’s probably most familiar to most of us. And if it stopped there, I think this would be a prayer about church unity and learning to get along with other people. But it doesn’t stop there. Jesus continues the thought “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...” (21-22) Do you see what’s happening here? Jesus’ prayer is invitational, calling believers into unity with himself and with God. Jesus is praying for his people to participate in the unity and the oneness of the Trinity. It’s not that how we get along with one another isn’t important; it’s that Jesus is talking about something so much bigger.

Christians have struggled for centuries to find ways to talk about the Trinity – a God who is three in one, three persons with an inseparable unity. Every explanation falls short, every metaphor breaks down at some point. What I know about the Trinity is that the relationships between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are eternal and unbreakable. In our lives, you and I have never seen anything that is eternal or unbreakable. Yet right here, Jesus tells the Father that he wants the people who hear his disciples’ message to have that same depth and intimacy of connection, that eternal, unbreakable bond with him that he and the Father have had since before the creation of the world.

Allow me to take that even a bit further. Jesus is praying for *you* to be eternally, unbreakably connected to him. Sit with that thought for a minute. Jesus gets the chance to pray for you, and this is what he asks the Father for – to have you, flawed and imperfect human that you are, all entangled and enmeshed with him for all of eternity. I

don't know that I have the right word for what that ought to make us feel. Loved. Cherished. Chosen. Humbled. Awestruck.

If we keep going, we realize that we, like the disciples, aren't just chosen and loved. We also have a purpose. The disciples' have a message to share with the world that leads to us becoming believers. And we have a mission of being united with Jesus, as Jesus is united with the Father, "so that the world may believe that [the Father] sent [Jesus]." What this means is that you are not the final link in this chain. You are not a life that is disconnected from the world around you. When Jesus prays for you, he declares your life's purpose. You and I have a job to do.

Sent By God

There is a concept in academics known as the *missio Dei*. *Missio Dei* is a Latin phrase that means "mission of God" or "sending of God." Jesus' prayer in John 17 paints the picture of the "mission of God" or the "sending of God" as well as any other passage of the Bible. Do you want to know what God has done in the world? Read John 17. Do you want to know what God's vision for the world is? Read John 17. Do you want to know what your purpose is in God's world? Read John 17. God is on the move, and you're a part of that movement.

God has sent Jesus into the world. Jesus has sent the disciples into the world. The disciples are going to form the church. Jesus promises that when he returns to the Father, he will send the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort and rebuke the church. And the church is sent into the world so that "the world may believe that [the Father] sent [Jesus]" (21) and that the Father has "loved them even as [He has] loved [Jesus]." (23)

We are the unlikely tool that Jesus has chosen to use to keep God's mission on track. I have heard it said that God's church doesn't have a mission; God's mission has a church. I think that might be a good way to think of ourselves. We are part of the sent community of God that has been spreading throughout the world for nearly 2000 years.

The content of this prayer is so important to Jesus that he basically repeats again as soon as he finishes praying it. There are a few variations - namely the added themes of "glory" and "love" - but the structure and purpose are shockingly similar.

<i>Verses 20-21</i>	<i>Verses 22-23</i>
My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,	I have given them the glory that you gave me,
that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.	That they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me –
May they also be in us	so that they may be brought to complete unity.

so that the world may believe that you have sent me.	Then the world will know that you sent me
	and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus will continue the theme of glory and love in verse 24, when he prays, “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.” In the span of three short verses, we read that Jesus has given us glory, God has given Jesus glory, all that glory is somehow connected to unity, and that love is mixed in too.

Love is a concept that is pretty familiar to us, but “glory” is one of those church words that we don’t typically use in our day-to-day lives. Glory, when we use it as a noun, is what makes someone impressive to others. It could be reputation, honor, splendor, power, or (as is often the case in the Bible) God’s presence or radiance.

To paraphrase Jesus’ prayer, Jesus has let us in on the presence of God so that we can be completely united with God the Father, just like Jesus is. And by that connection, the world will know that the Father sent Jesus, and that he loves the world just as he loves Jesus. When we experience that intimacy of unity with God, we will see the honor and power that the Father gave to Jesus before the creation of the world. So love leads to glory which leads to unity.

This whole prayer is layer upon layer of Jesus’ desire for us to experience God’s presence and to be brought into perfect unity with the Trinity, as the persons of the Trinity experience perfect, eternal unity with one another. And in doing so, Jesus’ hope is that we will provide a radical witness to the world of the power of God’s love.

The final two verses of the prayer reiterate that our mission and witness is directed to “the world,” (25) and give us an assurance that we are not left to the work alone. Jesus says, “I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known” (26).

Radical Unity in Action

This brings me back to where I started, when I asked you to take the unity among believers or cooperation among churches and set it out of your mind. This is why. That kind of unity and cooperation is great, but it’s neither possible nor profitable without first accepting Jesus’ invitation into the unity that he shares with the Father and the Spirit. What Jesus did 2000 years ago and what Jesus is still doing today is a radical reordering of our world.

In these last moments alone with his disciples, Jesus doesn’t tell them how to organize the church or themselves, or how to solve all the problems that are coming their way. What Jesus is up to is something so much bigger. Jesus knows that we have arguments with other people. Jesus knows that some groups of Christians can be vicious toward

others. Jesus knows that nations go to war with other nations. And I believe that all of these things break Jesus' heart and that he cares about each of them.

If you hear me saying that how we interact with one another doesn't matter, I haven't made my point clear enough. I get a lot of text messages most Sunday mornings, but the messages started extra-early today. Around 4:45 this morning, I heard from our mission partner, Fyodor, who has been scrambling for the past month to house and care for Ukrainian refugees who escaped from Ukraine to come to Moldova. His message began, "This morning the war came even closer to us" - and it went on to explain that there is fighting in Odessa, about 120 miles east of him. Forces from Germany have arrived at the Romanian border (on the west of Moldova) - as close as 50 miles from him. To put that in North Carolina perspective, Chapel Hill is about 120 miles east of us, and Black Mountain is about 50 miles west. Imagine living here in Hickory as a war is raging in Chapel Hill, and tanks are rolling up I-40 to our back door.

Does how we get along with other individuals and how groups of people treat one another matter? Absolutely it does. It matters a great deal. The Gospel does not give us license to focus *only* on our connection to Jesus, forsaking all others. It is not a spiritual "hall pass" to act however we want. Jesus repeatedly demonstrates and talks about how to love one another and how to be a community. It's just not his primary focus in this passage.

In this passage, we see how Jesus prays when his time on earth is running short. He can't teach the disciples everything he wants them to know. He can't pray every prayer he wants to pray. In this moment, Jesus needs to prioritize the very most important things, because his time on earth has just about run out. There simply will not be a chance for him to deal with all the rest of the important things before he goes to the cross. This is kind of a glimpse into how Jesus does prayer triage. And I think that makes this passage all the more powerful and all the more important.

Church, on his last night of "normal" life on this earth, Jesus prayed for *you*. On the eve of an excruciating death meant to save you, Jesus prayed for you. At his last meal with his closest friends, Jesus prayed for you. And what he prayed for was that you would know him intimately, that your life would be eternally connected to his, and that you would know this so deeply that your life couldn't help but reflect the love and glory of God to the world around you.

There is so much more that we can and should do in response to that kind of love and acceptance, and there are so many ways to show that kind of radical unity. But at the heart, Jesus wants to make sure that your first priority is being connected - eternally and unbreakable - to him.

That's what it means to pray "that we all would be one."