



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**Brian Mitchell
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**ONE
John 17:20-26**

I think it is safe to say the prayer of Jesus that we are most familiar with would be the Lord's Prayer. We are taught that prayer as a child, we pray that prayer during every worship service most funerals and weddings, that prayer not only provides a framework for how we should pray but it also brings us comfort in its familiarity. However, today's scripture is a section of another prayer of Jesus. This prayer which has become known as Jesus' High Priestly Prayer is found in John Chapter 17. It is situated toward the end of Jesus upper room discourses. After the last supper, after words of instruction and before Jesus' arrest. So, this is toward the very end of Jesus' ministry on earth before the cross, as John tells it. Jesus has been speaking to his followers, but at this point he turns his attention to God the Father.

The lectionary divides up the prayer in three and uses it on this Sunday over years A, B and C. This is year C by the way, so we find ourselves reading the final third of Jesus High Priestly Prayer. In the first section, verses 1 – 5, which are read in year A, Jesus is praying for himself to be glorified in order that The Father may be glorified. In the second portion of the prayer, Jesus prays for the believing community, those to whom he has made God known. Jesus entrusts the community to The Father's care.

Our passage is the third part of Jesus prayer. The subject of the prayer is now also those who will believe through the witness of the believing community. Faith communities around the world and faith communities of the future. It is safe to say that at this point we are included as the subjects of Jesus' prayer.

It is a prayer of unity and oneness that is grounded in the unity and oneness of Jesus and The Father. The believing community is and will be one because it shares in the relationship of Jesus and The Father. And the community's oneness serves as a witness to the world. Verse 23 we see love defines the community's relationship to one another and with The Father and Jesus.

So, there we go, it would easy enough to just wrap it up here, Jesus is praying that we be one, that oneness defines us and is our witness to the world. So let's celebrate our oneness and head on home.

But perhaps we should allow ourselves to be challenged a little here.

As most of you know I started seminary last fall and one of the first classes I took was a church history class. We studied the church from Pentecost to the Reformation. It didn't take very long to realize that the church has not been very good through the centuries at being one. Disagreements and schism have been part of the church's existence almost from the very beginning. If in fact being one and being united serves as our witness to the world, then we probably should take a look at what it means to be one.

We know that there are three main branches of Christian belief, The Eastern Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church and The Protestant Church. Within the Protestant faith there are many denominations, I read an estimate this week that put the number at over 20,000. It is not always painless or desired, but what ultimately happens when we disagree is schism, where the church splits. It happened early in church history, but schism is not only in our history books. In this moment we are witnessing a schism within the Methodist church, a schism that we have experienced ourselves within the Presbyterian Church.

In the United States we have the Presbyterian Church USA, (that's us), The Presbyterian Church in America, The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, The ECO- A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians and I'm sure many more.

Even within PCUSA, because General Assembly has left individual presbyteries and churches to determine some practices, we find some discord.

So, what does it mean for us to be one? To experience oneness. Should we concentrate on being one within these 4 walls, perhaps be one within our denomination, be one within the Presbyterian world. Should we think about oneness with the protestant faith or with all Christians? I suspect when Jesus speaks on being one like as he is one with the Father that there is something more going on here.

I think I have mentioned before that I was in a church drama group with some friends when I was young. We were quite irreverent and tried to have a laugh with what we did. When I typed that a few days ago, the predictive text thought I was saying irrelevant, which made me chuckle and reconsider what we really were! Drama would probably be the wrong word for it. Comedy sketches with a message of sorts was really what we did.

Well at the time we were doing that there was a real effort amongst local ministers in our local area to get together for ecumenical worship. They would ask us to perform every so often. We had the Church of Scotland folks, (that's' the Presbyterians), the Baptists, the Episcopalians, there may have been a Methodist church involved and there was a non-denominational charismatic church that sometimes came along. It was a wonderful experience worshipping and sharing with folks from different backgrounds, and I don't think it happened too much back then.

But There was sometimes a little tension with different worship styles. People didn't quite know how to act around each other. I remember the Episcopalian minister and some of his folks in were loud in worship and loved dancing and hugging and raising hands in worship, and there were a few more reserved folks not quite up to speed with that just yet. An offered hug would be met with a firm handshake!

So, in our wisdom we decided to address this awkwardness with a drama sketch. One of the guys was a bit worried about doing it, in case we upset anyone, which was not like him. We did it anyway and we used this passage that we read from this morning. We decided to replicate the gathering in a sketch and gently made fun of everyone. We started the sketch with an awkward hug verses handshake greeting, then we moved to worship, and had one of the guy's dancing raising hands and trying to make the reserved folk do the same, to be met with loud tutting head shaking. We then had the message, which was basically this prayer of Jesus, which you know was the turning point in the

sketch. It all ended with a farewell greeting where the hugger met the handshaker met again, and as the hugger offered his hug, he changed to a handshake and the handshaker changed to hug, and scene.

Very simple and not really earthshaking but the point made was that when we disagree, when we are not one, common ground is often found when we decide to Make the first move toward reconciliation.

It is easy to focus on that which we disagree. But we mustn't forget that there is much that unites us. We are one in Christ. We are one in the need of God's Grace. We are united in being called to serve others as followers of Jesus. We are one in being called to give love a priority in our life. To Love God and to love people is our greatest call. It is greater than our differences.

And as social media and news media love disagreements as disagreements garner viewers and therefore advertisers and therefore dollars, we must remember there is much that unites us. From an American point of view, and I understand this is coming from a Scottish guy, but I have been here long enough. Our country is united in respecting and honoring those who paid the ultimate price in the service of their country on Memorial Day, and hopefully every day. Our country is united in rejecting an unjust war forced upon the people of Ukraine. Our country is united in grief and shock over the loss of young lives in an elementary school in Uvalde Texas. I would imagine for many of us we are united in a need to be in church today to worship, to pray, to turn to God as we process these events.

I understand we are not always united in how we solve these issues, but it is good for us to remember that there may be folks with whom we disagree sitting around us in these pews today, who are our sisters and brothers in Christ who are grieving and processing. Your compassion and love for each other is more important than your disagreements. It is good to remember that there is common ground where we are one. It is from there we must build.

Let us not confuse Unity with Uniformity. when Jesus prays that we are one, I am not convinced that he expected all believers to agree on everything. Unity and Oneness may best be demonstrated in diversity. In the 12th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul teaches that diversity is not opposed to unity; it is essential to it. How could the body function rightly if every member were an eye, or an ear, or a mouth? Perhaps unity demands diversity, and diversity displays true unity.

One of the things I love about the Presbyterian Church is that we allow and encourage differences of opinion and if we do it right, we learn to live in that diversity, as we are governed by love. I believe God may grieve our schism and inability to live in our differences, but when we learn to live and worship together, God must be glad. Because it shows that there is something greater than those differences, something more important and in that I think we start to get to what Jesus is praying for.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 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.

The Father and the Son and the Spirit for that matter and undeniably one, yet there is diversity within the Godhead. The unity of the Trinity is not found in uniformity but in union. The unity of the trinity is union of being, of essence and of purpose.

We are the children of God by faith if we dwell in God and Christ dwells in us (verse 23); there is then essential unity, between the believer and God, and also between one believer and every other.

Now I do think there are fundamental doctrines for us to agree on, but our unity is not defined by our agreement on non-fundamental issues, but by being a follower of Jesus governed by love. In some of Jesus last moments on earth Jesus prayed that we would be one. He prayed that this is how we would be identified in the world. Our oneness is the mark of the Christian community. We all want to make difference; we all want change for the better. As you seek your path to that change, remember your oneness with this community. Remember the love that governs all we say and do as Jesus followers.