

May 16, 2021
Rev. Kerry Smith

John 17:20-26 Catch Your Breath in Times of Division
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 17:20-26

New Revised Standard Version

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in 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 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, 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. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Do you ever wish that you could say something and make it come true? Like wishing your house was clean and then it happened? Or wishing dinner was made and then it was? Or wishing the workday was over and it was? Jesus is praying a prayer in this passage, and he wills what he is praying. It is a prayer that looks to the future. Jesus was praying not only for the people seated around him at the table that evening but also for his future followers, which thanks be to God, includes us. It is a prayer that focuses on unity, on all being one. Now we just have to act as if it is true.

We have so many examples in our world of people far from being one. Our Congress shows us Republicans who don't agree with Republicans and Democrats who don't agree with Democrats. Half this country thinks the other half of this country is its enemy. We have prayed this week for Israel and Palestine in their never-ending hostility toward one another.

Jesus' prayer describes his hope, his vision, his picture of what we, his followers, are to look like and how we are to live our lives together. That “all may be one.” It is a prayer for community. It doesn't mean that we all have to get along all the time. We are one in Christ whether we agree with each other or not. We are one in Christ whether we like one another or not. We are a part of Christ.

When we baptize someone, we say their first and middle name only. We don't say their last name because their last name in their baptism becomes Christ. They are a part of the body of Christ, a part of this community.

A few years ago I was working at a church and one of the members was a college student. This person presented themselves as male and I didn't realize that they were transgender. His dad came to visit and it seemed like this transition for his dad of having a daughter and now having a son was difficult because their dad used so many feminine pronouns for their son. It was over the top how many times he referred to his son as she. It wasn't an accident, it was on purpose to be hurtful. I remember thinking what was the point? Why was his dad being so mean? His dad using feminine pronouns that his son no longer identified with was only going to push his son further away. What did his meanness say to his son?

Writer John O'Donohue said, “If you send out goodness from yourself, or if you share that which is happy or good within you, it will all come back to you multiplied ten thousand times. In the kingdom of love there is no competition; there is no possessiveness or control. The more love you give away, the more love you will have.”¹

Jesus' prayer reminds us that our unity, our oneness, is to be a sign to the world of God's love. The disciples washed each other's feet, ate together, and cried together. If unity is going to

¹ Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom

work, we have to do life together. We have to be vulnerable and honest. We are going to get our toes stepped on, and we are going to do some embarrassing things. We are going to have to learn how to forgive and be forgiven first here, in this community of faith, and then outside in the world.

There is a ministry in North Texas called Ubuntu. It is an after-school strings program that provides high-quality music education and academic tutoring for underserved students in Dallas. Greenland Hills has hosted some of their programs in the past. This ministry is named Ubuntu because Ubuntu is an African Bantu principle of the interconnectedness of all people. It means “I am because we are.” It means coming together, lifting up one another, and creating life-changing opportunities for young musicians. It means loving those around you and being in community with them.

My favorite part of the scripture passage is the last verse, “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” Jesus is saying I share this incredible intimacy with God, and I have come so that you might be able to participate in that love and intimacy as well. Yes, God loves you. Yes, you matter to God, but Jesus wants us to know that this intimate relationship of love that Jesus shares with God is available to us.

Five times within these six verses, Jesus names love as the key descriptor of divine relationships. Love is the bond within God. Love is the divine gift to the disciples. Love is the magnetic grace through which God seeks to attract the world. Love is the ingredient that Jesus prays will be within God’s followers.

In a sermon preacher and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber prayed this prayer, “Lord, our country is divided, our families are fractured, our relationships need mending. Convert our fear into love. . . . As your people we will share the pain and then share also in the joy—until the day in which we gather around your throne next to all the people we never thought should be there.”²

We all do better when we can see our common humanity and all that unites us. There is a saying in Methodist circles that is attributed to John Wesley, the first Methodist, but there is no record of him actually saying it. But, it’s really good. “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and, in all things, charity.” What is the essential core that holds all Christians together? Loving God and loving people comes to mind. How can we work toward unity to love God and love people, especially with those we don’t agree? John Wesley did say, “Though we can’t think alike, may we not love alike?”³

Jesus lived in a divided time. Just within Judaism there was division as to how to respond to the Roman Empire. Some felt they should dutifully be obedient. Others wanted a full rebellion. Jesus invited people from varying perspectives to the same table and called them all his disciples. Jesus wants us to know that we can love others and work toward unity because God has first loved us. Where in your life is God inviting you, or perhaps challenging you to work toward unity?

John Wesley was speaking about those who opposed him in the church, He said, “Give me your hand. I do not mean, ‘Be of my opinion.’ You need not: I do not expect it or desire it. Neither do I mean I will be of your opinion. I cannot. Keep your opinion; I mine; and that as steadily as ever. You need not endeavor to come over to me or bring me to you. Only give me your hand. We must act as each is fully persuaded in their own mind. Hold fast that which you believe is most acceptable to God, and I will do the same. Let all these smaller points stand

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2016/04/1398/>

³ John Wesley’s sermon “Catholic Spirit”

aside. If your heart is as my heart, if you love God and all humankind, I ask no more. Simply, give me your hand.”⁴ Jesus prayed in our scripture passage that “all may be one.” May God help us to remember John Wesley’s words and Jesus’ prayer that we may see those around us in a new and united way. Thanks be to God, Amen.

⁴ John Wesley’s sermon “Catholic Spirit”