

That We May Be One

John 17: 1-11

Seventh Sunday after Easter/ 8th May 2005

A dear friend from high school days sent me an email this week with a photograph attached. It was a picture of a young girl, maybe four or five, kneeling by her bed offering her prayers with two dolls situated beside her in a similar position – all three of them were ‘caught’ praying. The photo didn’t look staged, but simply the honest, open, imaginative intimacy of a child conversing with God. Above the photo was a verse from scripture, Matthew 28:10, where Jesus said, “Wherever two or three are together in my name, there I am in the midst of them,” followed by a question, referring to the photo of the child and her dolls, asking, “Does this count?” I have a feeling Jesus was there.

Have you ever stumbled upon someone deep in prayer? Have you ever interrupted someone conversing with God? Perhaps it was overhearing your daughter or grandson in their room, saying their prayers at night or maybe just casually talking with God throughout the day as a continual companion. Or maybe it was sitting down to dinner and when a little child offers to thank God for the meal and then goes on to give thanks for the day and for the trees, for every blessed thing in her life and she prays as if you’re not even there, with an honesty and openness and intimacy that takes your breath away, as if she were along with God. Such moments are encounters with holiness and soon you become uncomfortable because you feel like a *voyeur*, looking at something so private and personal you want to look away, like being before holiness.

That’s what strikes me about this scene in John 17, the beginning of Jesus’ prayer for his disciples, what some have called his “High Priestly Prayer.” Here Jesus, like a priest (a priest is a mediator), a mediator between God and humanity, a go-between prays for his disciples, prays for us and we get to listen in. John is the only gospel writer to give an account of this prayer. It’s really an amazing part of the New Testament. Sure we know that Jesus was often in prayer, his entire life moved to the rhythm of prayer, but apart from his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane we never really hear what Jesus is saying. Here we get to *overhear* Jesus talking with his Father. And like coming upon someone deep in prayer, there is such power, such openness, such intimacy between Jesus and God, it is an encounter so private and personal that you wonder if you’re supposed to be there.

But you're drawn in and you cannot help but to listen, to become engaged – not unlike a children's message. Sometimes people are embarrassed to admit to clergy that they sometimes get more out of the children's message than the sermon. This doesn't bother me when I hear this – I'm just glad something is getting out. But there are good reasons why this happens, it has to do with the *psychology of listening*. People often 'get' the message of a children's sermon because they don't think the minister is talking to them (and he isn't, she isn't). Adults might think, "He's talking to the children, not me. So I can let my defenses down a little and relax until the big sermon comes along." It's then, when you're *overhearing* something unintended for you that perhaps you're able to really hear it. When the sermon comes, up go the defenses. This is the power of *indirect communication*.¹

Jesus knows the others are listening on. Jesus the consummate teacher can use even prayer to make a point, to ensure that the disciples understand clearly what God is doing through Jesus and what Jesus expects from them. Perhaps Jesus lets them overhear the prayer because if he said it to them directly, they wouldn't get it. And what he says is *vital*. They cannot afford to miss it, to not get it. But the defenses of the human ego are resolute; the ego doesn't like anyone to undermine its authority, even God; and the ego doesn't like any idea that will weaken its powers, even the gospel. "If God is going to be in my life," we sometimes think, "it will have to be on my terms." That's why Jesus moves deeper than the ego in order to release people to *live* in a new way.

And that new way is a way that puts God first. John stresses that this was Jesus' purpose: *to glorify God with his life*. Jesus lifted up upon a tree would draw all the eyes of the world to him and through him to God. From the first to the last the gospel is about God's glory, a glory that was revealed through Jesus for the entire world to see. When people are drawn to Jesus, they are drawn to the Father, just as Jesus acts not on his own behalf but on behalf of his Father. In this sense to know Jesus is to know the Father and to know the Father is to know eternal life. Or we might say, that is life – here and now – touched by eternity. John emphasizes the point that a life touched by eternity does not begin after we die, it is a new way of living that begins here and is fulfilled in the life to come, where both 'here' and 'there' we find our lives are infused with God's presence; that's eternity. Eternity is not the absence of time as much as it is the quality of time, time that is embraced by God's never-ending presence. And that begins here and now, in prayer. Jesus says it himself, "And this is eternal life, that they may know

¹ This was a technique used by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). See Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (Chalice Press, 2002).

you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (17:3)” *Hear that?* This is eternal life, *knowing God, knowing Jesus* was sent from God. This starts here and continues in us and through us.

Jesus’ life was characterized by this quality of eternity because he opened himself up to God, completely. He did not serve himself. He was not confined by the limits of his ego, but his ego was aligned to the greater glory of God. Assured of the fact that God willed the redemption of the world he opened himself up to that future and gave himself completely to it. What would you expect from the Son of God? True. But Jesus was also the Son of Man, the truly, authentically human one who understood what it takes to be and become human. *Biblically speaking, one cannot be human without God. We find this on the opening pages of Genesis. One becomes human through one’s radical dependence upon and openness to God – and only God. To turn from God is, biblically speaking, to become non-human or inhuman. It’s that dependence and openness to God that Jesus hopes for his disciples, then and now.*

Mindful of his relationship to God the prayer then moves to his disciples and from his disciples it becomes a prayer for the world because his disciples are sent out into the world.² Ever-widening circles of concern flow out from the primary concern of his life – the glory of God.

The love that Jesus has for God and God’s glory, the love that connects Jesus with God is to be diffused among God’s people to connect all God’s children. That’s what Jesus hopes for his disciples. It is our *unity*, according to Jesus, that will be a testimony to the power of God in the world. The bond that holds Jesus and God together is the same bond that holds God and the world together. Our unity, our connectedness then becomes a sign, proof maybe of God’s presence in the world. That’s what Jesus is praying for, “Protect them [meaning us] in your name that you have given me, *so that they may be one, as we are one.*”

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? *Did you really hear this?* “That they may be one, as we are one.” This is a lot to pray for; then again, he is *Jesus*. But this is tough! Did Jesus really believe this was possible? If the unity of God’s people would be a demonstration to the world of God’s love witnessed in Jesus, then what does our disunity say? One might logically push this to the opposite

² Cullen I. K. Story, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose, Pattern, and Power*, Foreword by James E. Loder (Shippensburg, PA: Ragged Edge Press, 1997), pp. 324ff.

extreme and wonder if the *disunity* of God's people is proof that God does not exist. You could make a good argument here. There's a lot riding on this verse – like the whole credibility of the gospel!³ What do all of our divisions in the church say about the gospel? Christians can't even agree on what the Lord's Supper means or doesn't mean. The history of the church is appalling. What about all the other divisions, animosities, and hates that fill the church of Jesus Christ throughout the world? What about all that is yet to be forgiven and restored in our lives, what do these say about the truth of the gospel? Is Jesus' prayer an empty ideal, out of touch with the 'real' world? Are his expectations simply too high? The sins of the church and God's people are immense and there is much to be forgiven. Sometimes, I wonder what it will take for the church to wake up and realize how much we have become an obstacle in people's pursuit of God, instead of being a means through which people might connect with God?

Maybe we can learn something from the flow of Jesus' prayer: God first, then the disciples, then the world. We start with the God relationship, Jesus' primary concern, and from there he moved out into ever-widening circles of concern. With his relationship with God firmly in place he can truly care for the needs of the disciples and beyond them, the world. The same is true in our life; putting God first allows the rest of our lives to be put into perspective. Seeking after God and strengthening that relationship above every other relationship then allows us to care for ourselves and the people in our lives. Seeking after God, putting God first and God's will allow us to look out upon the wider world with a different perspective. We see others and the world and even God, not from the selfishness of the ego but from within our relationship with God. It is our personal unity with God which is diffused out into our world.

But the irony here is that *unity for the Jew and the Christian is never uniformity*. Jonathan Sacks, a leading Rabbi in Britain, makes this insightful point in his important book, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. "Biblical monotheism," he writes, "is not the idea that there is one God and therefore one truth, one faith, one way of life. On the contrary, it is the idea that *unity creates diversity*."⁴ The Bible's account of creation makes this clear, in contrast with the creation stories of other religions and cultures. The miracle of creation is not that there is a singular 'leaf', but that there are 250,000 different kinds of leaves. The cause for wonder is not that there is a singular 'bird,' but that 9,000 species exist today. The proper object of amazement

³ Bruce D. Marshall, "The Disunity of the Church and the Credibility of the Gospel," *Theology Today* (1993).

⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 53.

is not that there is one language, but that there are 6,000 languages spoken throughout the world. Even our recent knowledge of DNA tells us everything that lives uses the same genetic code but with a mind-numbing complexity and multiplicity.⁵ There's something built into creation that allows for many in the one, that one includes the many.⁶

You see, the worship of Yahweh, as Jesus made explicit for us, requires complete devotion. "You shall love the Yahweh, your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." And in our devotion to Yahweh something else happens – our hearts begin to open up; the world begins to open up. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There's something about devotion to Yahweh, in knowing God that brings with it an opening up of the heart, mind, and spirit. We begin to make space for people, make space for difference, for diversity, for multiplicity. It obviously doesn't bother Yahweh and neither should it bother Yahweh's people. Yahweh obviously delights in it and maybe so should we. In fact, when people come together to worship and follow Yahweh, when people come from north and south, east and west, Red State and Blue State, to sit at table in the kingdom, we learn there is room for everyone. It is Christ who calls us to make room for *everyone*. There is *unity in Christ, but not uniformity*. In fact, just as a whole rainbow of difference is found in the spectrum of light, so, too it is with Yahweh's people when we find our unity in Yahweh's glory and Yahweh's Christ.

Perhaps, our greatest opportunity for unity is in worship. In Peter Shaffer's musical, *Amadeus*, about the life of Mozart, Shaffer puts the following words into the mouth his composer: I tell you I want to write a finale lasting half an hour! A quartet becoming a quintet becoming a sextet. On and on, wider and wider – all sounds multiplying and rising together – and the together making a sound entirely new! I bet you that's how God hears the world. Million of sounds ascending at once and mixing in His ear to become an unending music, unimaginable to us!⁷

Maybe that's how God hears our worship, many voices heard as one. Maybe this is when we are really one. The unity of our commitment to God can be witnessed to the world when we worship, when the church is really the church: many voices, many life stories, many journeys of the Spirit, yet one in Christ, a marvelous diversity that seeks only to glorify God.

⁵ Sacks, pp. 53-54. Citing Matt Ridley, *Genome* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999).

⁶ See Colin Gunton's significant work, *The One, The Three, and the Many* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁷ Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 70, cited in Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (London: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 202.

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