

***Becoming One with God and Jesus***  
**A Sermon on John 17:20-26**  
**Seventh Sunday of Easter**  
**June 2, 2019**

**Introduction**

Who did your homework this week? What do you believe the author is trying to say in John 17? This is your chance to give your reflections on the text like Judy does.

[Responses]

It is hard to read this chapter in isolation from the rest of the Gospel of John. This prayer sums up the themes in the Gospel of John. It comes at the end of the Farewell Discourse, which extends from Chapters 13 through 17 in John. Jesus delivers the Farewell Discourse as part of John's version of the Last Supper. Jesus is trying to comfort the disciples, telling them how to continue with his work after he is gone.

Today's text is called the High Priestly Prayer. Jesus as high priest is a mediator between God and the disciples. Jesus prays to God on behalf of the disciples.

**First Move: Jesus' Prayer to God**

While Jesus is still reclining with the disciples at the Last Supper, he turns from the disciples to offer this prayer directly to God. This is one of the few times in the Gospels where we hear Jesus talk directly to God. Jesus is no longer speaking to the disciples, but they can overhear the prayer.

The prayer shows how different the Gospel of John is from the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the other three gospels, the prayer after the Last Supper is in the garden in Gethsemane. Jesus is in agony in Mark's gospel, asking God to take the cup from him. In Luke, Jesus is sweating blood. In John, there is no Gethsemane. Jesus prays at the table, and he prays with confidence. Confidence that what will be asked for will be received shows union with God. Jesus believes that the crucifixion is the hour when he will be glorified and the world will see that he faithfully carried out the work that God sent him to do.

Immediately after this prayer, Jesus is arrested in the garden. This is part of the glorification of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Jesus is glorified through the passion, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension.

The prayer is poetic, but John repeats the same words over and over. It can all run together unless you stay focused. It reminds me of *I Am the Walrus*: “I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together.

Today’s text is the last seven verses of the prayer, which begins in verse 1. The prayer fits together as a whole, and we lose part of the meaning if we separate these seven verses from the rest of the prayer.

Jesus begins by praying for his own glorification. The Greek word for glory is δόξα. Its root meaning is bright, shining, radiant. The most important Hebrew word for glory is *kavod*; its root meaning is heavy, weighty, important. Glory in both Greek and Hebrew is a visible manifestation of God’s presence, which is usually expressed in acts of power. Ancient Israel is repeatedly called in the Old Testament to remember God’s mighty deeds in Egypt, which were the ten plagues that Moses warned Pharaoh about and the parting of the Red Sea to deliver the Hebrew slaves from the mighty Egyptian army. Jesus’ miracles in the first half of the Gospel of John were signs of God’s power: changing water into wine, healing the paralytic, feeding the 5,000, walking on water, healing the blind man, and raising Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus says that he has accomplished the work that God sent him to do. These signs, or deeds of power, show that Jesus has the power of God, so that all people will know that Jesus was sent by God. The purpose of the signs was to enable people to know and trust in God. God’s ultimate power is creating life. When people enter into relationship with God, God gives them eternal life. Jesus says, “And this is eternal life: that they might know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ.” Eternal life in the Gospel of John means God’s own life. God is sharing God’s own life with people who trust in God.

Jesus now asks God to glorify him and to restore him to the glory he had at the beginning of creation when he was at God’s side as the Logos. God will do this by the greatest act of power in the gospels, raising Jesus from the dead and giving him new life.

In the middle part of the prayer, Jesus prays for his disciples. First, he distinguishes the disciples from the world. John believed that the world was created good, but that it had come under the power of the Evil One. The Roman Empire was acting as an agent of the Evil One. The Jewish political and religious leaders who collaborated with the Romans were agents of the Evil One. Jesus knows that the disciples will be rejected by society just as he was. Society is ruled by the Evil One.

Jesus asks God to guard and protect the disciples from the Evil One. Jesus also asks God to sanctify the disciples for mission so that they can go into the world and share the good news and bring more people into community with God. Sanctify means to make holy or set apart. Remember the Paraclete from last week. The Paraclete will help the disciples remember the words and deeds of Jesus. This will set them apart from the world. They will be sanctified in truth.

## **Second Move: Jesus' Prayer Looks to the Future**

The last part of the prayer looks to the future. It focuses on the disciples and on the new followers who will come into the new community because of the missionary efforts of the disciples. The disciples will carry on the work of Jesus and bring the message to other people that God is the true source of life, not the corrupt society ruled by the Evil One. The phrase eternal life could be ironic. Rome considered itself the eternal city, it was the pinnacle of civilization. Rome believed that it was ruling over the climactic age in history. John's gospel says, No, eternal life, life in the climactic age in history, comes from God not from Rome.

John is at his most poetic here. Jesus prays that the new community will be one, just as God and Christ are one. I in them and you in me, that they may be made complete as one.

Notice how many times the word, *one*, appears in today's text.

Verse 21: In order that all may be one.

Verse 22: That they may be one, just as we [are] one.

Verse 23: That they may be made complete into one.

This has overtones of ancient Greek philosophy. The One is synonymous with the Good. The One is unchanging, pure Spirit. All the differences that separate people fall away. The goal of existence is union with what is fundamental in reality.

The religious sensibility that John brings is that what binds everyone together is love. Love is what is fundamental in reality. God loved Jesus before the foundation of the world. God glorified Jesus by sending him into the world to show the world what God was like, to inspire people to love God, to turn toward God and away from a corrupt society. God loves Jesus and God loves the world. For God so loved the world that he sent his only son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Jesus loves the disciples. He lays down his life for them. He brings them God's gift of eternal life. Jesus gives the disciples one commandment—they are to love one another just as Jesus has loved them. They are to love and protect each other, to lay down their lives for their friends, to bring God's gift of eternal life to people.

In the last three verses, Jesus becomes even more emphatic. The verbs shift from I ask to I want or I desire. The shift in verbs reflects the confidence with which Jesus speaks to God and anticipates God's response. It also reflects the merging of Jesus' will with God's will. John describes Jesus throughout the Gospel as acting perfectly in accordance with God's will.

Jesus says, "I wish also that those whom you have given me may be with me where I am." Jesus' wish is for the disciples to have a place in heaven with him. This is the eschatological consummation—the disciples will be in the shining presence of God and Jesus, "that they may perceive [the] glory that you have given me, that you loved me before the foundation of the world."

This is one of the strongest visions of heaven in the New Testament. Heaven is not the romantic ideal that Renaissance poets and popular culture make it out to be, a place you go to see all your family and friends and pets who have died. The goal of human existence is to be in the immediate presence of God. Then we will be one with God. We will be overwhelmed with joy. As St. Augustine says in Book I of *Confessions*: "You stir [men and women] to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Jesus concludes the prayer by addressing God as righteous Father. God as judge will bring to his side those who know him. To know is stronger than to believe. Knowledge is the final stage of faith. To know in the Hebrew sense is to enter into relationship with.

Jesus made God's name known and he will continue to make God's name known. Name is a synonym for presence. Jesus does this so that the love that God has for Jesus may be in those who come to believe. All will be one.

### **Third Move: The Vertical Dimension of Unity**

A core belief of Disciples of Christ is the unity of all Christians. We call ourselves a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. Disciples have been leaders in the ecumenical movement, which attempts to bridge differences between Christians who have been separated by becoming part of different denominations.

I would like to look at unity from a different angle. We hear about the unity of disciples in other texts, such as when Jesus gives the great commandment in John 13 to love one another as I have loved you. That is the horizontal aspect of unity. I would like to focus on the vertical aspect, becoming one with God and Jesus.

This unity is not mystical union with God. This comes several centuries after John in Christian history. It comes in part from another Greek philosopher, Plotinus,

who wrote in the third century that the goal of human existence is to achieve union with the One through contemplation.

This unity is not the result of human effort and achievement. It is something that God gives us.

This unity cannot be combined with political power. Then it becomes lethal. We share in God's glory and we want others to recognize that glory and submit to our will.

Oneness with God comes in the High Priestly Prayer from bringing other people to God. That can be through your words or your actions. You will remind people of Jesus. Not by consciously seeking glory. By standing in solidarity with the least of these. Seeing other people as God sees them. Looking past the divisions that separate people. Finding common ground with people you disagree with. Loving people that don't love you.

Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn, in their book, *Disciples: Reclaiming Our Identity, Reforming Our Practice*, write that our unity in Christ is what gives our Christian unity a prophetic edge. God has created a world of diversity. Oneness doesn't mean sameness. Coming together as one does not mean that we surrender the differences that make us unique. Coming together as one does not mean that people of different races, nationalities and social class agree on all things. Coming together as one does not mean that people in the minority submit to majority rule. We come together because we have communion with one another by being in communion with Christ. Christ is the maypole and we are multi-colored ribbons dancing around it.

God's message of reconciliation is for the world, and the church is entrusted with this message. Kinnamon and Linn caution that we must be careful that our desire for reconciliation does not blunt our prophetic edge. We can disagree on important social issues, but we cannot fear the controversy that comes with prophetic witness. We can still hate division with people that we have been linked in communion with.

The church also is entrusted with doing the things of God. If Christ dwells within us, we will be agents of God's peace. Our lives will be transformed. We will no longer be preoccupied with things of the world, but with the things of God. "Do you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" [Luke 2:49].

That is hard for me. I love to watch and talk about sports and politics. It is hard to think of two more worldly fields. Oh, wait, I can think of one. I hate the app on my phone and my iPad that tells me how hours of screen time I had in the last week. Our phones and social media take us further away from God, Jesus and other people.

If we focus on the things of God, our convictions on issues such as war and peace and poverty and inequality will flow from our religious understandings of God

and Christ, not from political ideology. Great moral issues do intersect with politics, but we take our bearings from our faith not from the talking points of political parties.

The things of God also include mission. Caring for animals that are strays, abused or neglected. Trying to improve living conditions for people in prison. Letting people at Pride Festival know that God loves them.

Worldly things help us relax. They are fun. They stimulate us. The things of God can seem like an obligation. We work too much already and we just don't have the energy.

Our goal is to take that next step on our faith journey. Move from belief in God to knowing God. Make God an everyday thing. Doing things together as church or with other churches makes it easier. Churches are more intentional about doing the things of God.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus invites us to listen in on this prayer. Gail O'Day, a UCC scholar, says that Jesus places his hopes for the community in God's hands. He doesn't tell the disciples what they should be doing to promote church growth or Christian unity or even how to resist the Evil One. He trusts that his life, and the life of the community, depends on God. The church's future is God's future not ours. God's future is that we become one with God and Jesus.

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