

That They May Be One

John 17: 20-26

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**November 20, AD 2016
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If you've ever gone hiking in a mountainous area, perhaps you've experienced this. You see a peak which you'd like to summit. So you head up towards it. It looks the top is just beyond the next ridge. But when you get up that ridge, you realize there's another ridge between you and the peak. Then another, and another. Reading through the Gospel of John, chapters 13-17 is a bit like making for a distant peak. Every week there has been a new mountain to scale. And in this life, we will never get to the highest peak. But of course the journey towards those heights is transformative in itself.

I've learned so much about the **identity** Jesus gives us. We're the love *gift* passed between Father and Son; we're the *branches* that abide in Christ the vine; we are his *friends* for whom he lays down his life.

I've learned so much about the **mission** Christ gives us: we are to take up the towel and the basin in *footwashing* love; we are to bring forth *fruit* that tastes to the world like Jesus; we are sent into the world as *apostles* of heaven.

And I've learned so much about **who God is**. There is a love story that began before the world was made. From eternity the Father has loved the Son in the unity of the Spirit. But in the fullness of time that love story touched down in our world. The Son of God came to us as the man Jesus. He displayed the love he has always had for his Father, but he did it *as one of us!* He loved his Father from within our skin and bones. And we've seen that his great purpose was to include us in that love story. The Father and the Son want us to live within their great exchange of love. It's such a mystery it makes your brain hurt. It's also so beautiful it makes your heart ache. These chapters in John call us to the effort of summiting the highest peaks of Scriptural truth. The reward for making the mental, spiritual and emotional effort is joyful communion in Christ that leads to meaningful purpose in life. That, I would say, makes it totally worth it.

We have one more peak to start to climb this week as we overhear Jesus conclude his prayer to his Father. This is the part of the prayer where Jesus thinks of us. "I do not ask for these only, but for those who will believe in me through their word." Jesus has been praying quite tightly for his small band of disciples

who would soon face such distress at his crucifixion. But now he turns toward the future. He knows he will rise again and that the age of the church will begin. Those who saw him alive again would have the mission of bearing witness to the world that Jesus is Lord and Savior. He trusts that even though his few followers would be scattered in fear within hours after his prayer, a few days later they would come together again in faith and power that the crucified Jesus was risen forever. So he prayed for those who would come to know him down through the years. He prays for those who would come to believe in him through the word of these first disciples.

A few months ago, I was involved in a conversation with some people talking about what they were most looking forward to about heaven. Many great hopes came up: glorious reunions with departed loved ones, freedom from pain, restored minds, beholding face to face the beauty of Christ, and full understanding at last. One person, though, gave a surprising answer. He said, "I'm looking forward to hearing testimonies of how people came to Christ." I remember thinking, "Really? How long can that take? How interesting can that be? Amidst all the glory of heaven do you want to hear the little stories of individual believers?" This guy went on to explain. (And by the way, I can't remember who this was, so if it was you, please let me know so I can give you credit!)

He said, "Don't you realize that no testimony is about just one person? I came to faith in Christ on the day a particular person shared the gospel with me. But that wasn't the first time I had heard it. Lots of people had shared that glorious news. But just stick with the one guy who was there when I made a decision to accept who Jesus is and give him my life. That guy didn't just pop into the world from heaven. Somebody told *him* the story. And he has a whole history in his own personal life of how somebody led him out of darkness into the light of Christ. But the one that led him to see who Jesus is also got led by someone else. So it goes all the way back to the apostles themselves. My testimony doesn't begin with the day I came to faith. It doesn't even begin with the day I was born. It goes all the way back to the person who told the person who told the person who, hundreds of generations later, told me. There are hundreds of stories if you just drew a straight line from the apostles to me. But if you add up all the intersecting stories, all the ways the gospel got passed so that I would get in on it, there are hundreds of thousands of interconnected stories. It's going to take eternity to hear the wondrous testimonies. And each one belongs to all of us. We're all connected!

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word. There on the last ledge of freedom before his passion, Jesus peered in

prayer through the years to see the eternal glory of a cascade of belief. He heard the strains of praise in a music that will go on forever, catching up vast multitudes of those who hear and believe the witness. When you think about how the gospel of eternal life actually gets shared, it's just breathtaking to be included.

Realizing our great interconnectedness is essential to what Jesus asks his Father, "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me." He prays down through the generations and across the globe, "that they may all be one." He asks that we will live out the reality of who we are in Christ Jesus. The disciples of Jesus would soon be called the church. It's a word taken from the Greek culture of the time. It means literally the assembly of citizens. The church is the gathering of those who share a heavenly citizenship. We share an identity of being no longer sourced from this world, but sourced, originated, from the life of the Triune God himself. And we belong to each other.

Our unity forms around the word of the apostles, their transmission of the news about Jesus. That is always and ever the starting point for the church. Let's ponder this a bit further. In his letter to the Ephesian church, Paul reminded the believers of this unity. He writes, "There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4: 4-6). We gather in this world to worship the one who called us into being and to support one another in our common mission of being sent back into the world with the news of Jesus. The church is all those who have been born from above, delivered out of this world and into the kingdom of the Beloved Son. The church is those who are interconnected in the one faith that joins each and all to Jesus.

We are those who share in one baptism. It's no accident that this is the sign of our union with Christ. We go under the waters and die to the old life. We get crucified to sin, becoming free of an identity based in this world. We rise in new life, receiving the Spirit who gives us the freedom of identity based in Christ alone. Everyone who belongs to Jesus has surrendered the rights to his own life. We have conceded control, yielded ownership, transferring the deed of life from self to the Lord Jesus. We are united around our common consecration to the Lordship of Jesus and the need of his being our Savior.

That's why I love the membership questions of our church. They put us all on the same page. They identify us as those who have consecrated ourselves to Christ. We have died with him in order to rise with him. The first question is very

humbling. It's a question that spells the death of pride. It's a question that demands that we walk in the truth. That we see ourselves through the eyes of God's truth. "Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, and without hope for your salvation except in his sovereign mercy?" That's a big Yes. Yes, I now know that I have no hope in myself. I can't save myself. I can't make my own meaning. I can't do enough good to take care of my sin. I can't figure out life by my own smarts. I can't endure the justice of God, I can only appeal to his mercy. I have died to saving myself.

Then comes the glorious positive. The opportunity to publically embrace the gospel news. "Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of sinners, and do you receive and depend upon him alone for your salvation as he is offered in the gospel?" I died to saving myself, being my own God, and I rise in grateful reliance on my faithful Savior Jesus. I stand and say, "I can't but Jesus can. He cleanses my sin. He overcomes my dying. He brings me joyfully home. He writes me into the love story he shares with his Father."

These are deep-down identity statements. They are offensive to our pride. They also restore our dignity. They demand consecration. They also open freedom. Those who answer Yes in faith to such questions share a bond that transcends all other differences. And I've found this to be true many times. In Egypt, I felt spiritual unity singing "How Great is our God" in Arabic. In north Baton Rouge, I found connection way beyond my comfort zone lifting my hands in a soulful praise song at Abounding Love. I can discover the oneness of Christ singing a praise song in Spanish with a tiny congregation in a remote Mexican city. Breaking bread in the church courtyard after worship, I could feel a deeper tie through awkward conversation in broken Spanish than I might ever feel talking shop with a fellow Vanderbilt English major. The oneness of believers is beautiful to behold.

But it takes work to maintain that unity. It takes broadening my mind and stretching my personal boundaries. It takes knowing we're not the only true church in town nor the only true denomination in the country, nor the only proper theological tradition in the world. It takes being willing to see how Christ is within the different expressions of his people. The church of Jesus is gloriously vast and diverse, forming around one center, the reality that Jesus alone is Lord and Savior.

Let's turn this one more way. Jesus prays for the unity of his church. He yearns for us to know our oneness in him. But not just so we can be happy and harmonious, enjoying freedom from strife. *The unity of the church is essential to*

the mission of the church. Jesus prays that we “may be perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me.” The world comes to know Jesus as it beholds the oneness of the church. We strive to stay in connection to fellow believers not only for personal peace, but for the sake of the gospel’s effectiveness in the world. Loving each other is an essential part of our mission to the world who does not yet know Christ.

Of all the ways we could talk about this, let’s close by narrowing the focus right down to the local level. The witness of our particular congregation in our community is directly related to the way we express our unity in Christ. Our unity is most effectively expressed not by being exactly the same but by the way we love each other. This is what a lonely, cynical, fragmented, frightened and dissolving people want to see. Is there a place where people truly care for each other? Is there a group that looks outward to gather in new people? Do they seek the good of the city where they live? Do they stick together when things get tough, when discussions get tense, or when life gets hard? Do they want me to be part of them?

In this, you may be very encouraged beloved church! I think just of things I have heard recently. A new member prayed in a home group meeting great thanks for a congregation that loves Jesus so deeply while welcoming new people so warmly. I think about some young visitors who wrote to tell me that this is the first church in which they have felt welcome after many attempts to find fellowship. I think about our choristers, the scholarship students who sing in our choir. They offered a concert for us last week, and each one of them before singing spoke of how welcome they feel and how much encouragement we offer to them. I think of finishing Bible study at St. James retirement community, then watching as 89-year-old Ellen Fox pushed the wheelchair for 97-year-old Jessie Gray since her helper hadn’t come to get her yet. I think about spontaneous prayers that happen all over this building on Sundays and through the week as people share their hearts and concerns with one another. I think of how our officers don’t give up on each other even when we have hard conversations about the direction and policies of the church. We hang together, determined to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace. It matters more than we will ever know. The love that is here is the most vital part of our mission to the world. Indeed, I’ve never see a congregation like this one.

So fare forward dear ones! Give thanks this week for such a great Savior who has called us to such sweet fellowship in this body. And know that as we sit down at table Thursday, the Dawsons will once again be giving deep and heartfelt thanks for you.