

That they may be one
John 17:20-26
First Presbyterian Church
June 2, 2019

Introduction to the Reading

Through our preaching each week, Heather and I strive to help you not only *learn* the biblical story, but to actually *live* into it... to discover that the story of Scripture is not only about folks who lived thousands of years ago but is also ABOUT us... INCLUDES us. This week's reading from John's Gospel offers us a powerful opportunity to do just that. John's vision of the Christian life is profoundly deep, spiritually speaking. And there is much here that invites us to find our place in it. But first, the timing of today's reading may be a bit confusing. Though our calendars say that Holy Week and Easter are behind us, this morning we return to the night of Maundy Thursday, when Jesus gathers his disciples around him for a final meal. He washes their feet and sets an example for them of humility and service. He shares bread and wine with them and then gives them a commandment to love another. And then, he tries to prepare them for his departure.... his "ascension" which we celebrate this morning. In some ways, this is an impossible task. They can't possibly comprehend all that is happening; perhaps they can't even hear him through their confusion and fear. And so, when he senses that he has maxed out their bandwidth... when he has said all that they can bear at this time... he promises to send them the Advocate... the Holy Spirit - who will come to them... remind them of what he has said...and lead them into all truth. And then... then... he does one more thing. He prays for them. The last thing Jesus does to prepare his disciples for his departure is to pray – and it's not just a quickie prayer – this is the longest prayer in any of the gospels. And as we eavesdrop on his prayer we hear Jesus praying not only for THEM, but for us. Just ponder that for a moment – when Jesus prayed 2000 years ago, he had us in mind.

Bible Reading

²⁰" I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that 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. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I 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.

²⁴Father, 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.

²⁵"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I 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."

Sermon

Imagine you are sitting in a darkened movie theater – munching popcorn and sipping Diet Coke from a straw. You have already seen five previews and now it's time for the feature presentation. The screen goes black... and from the speakers you begin to hear the sounds of a meal in progress – the clinking of utensils, the clattering of plates, the murmur of conversation. As the picture swims up out of the darkness you see men in robes reclining around a collection of greasy plates and half-filled cups – some of them still eating... reaching out with a piece of bread to sop up the last bit of gravy. “Jerusalem, A.D. 33” announces the subtitle as the camera slowly zooms in on a solemn face of a man who takes a long look at each of the others, then turns his eyes toward heaven. “Holy Father,” he sighs, “I pray that they might be one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” And then, closing his eyes and clenching his fists, he prays with urgency, “Let them be one, Father, let them be ONE!”

“May I have your attention, please,” says the man as he bangs his gavel on the podium. “May I have your attention, please.” When the convention hall is quiet, he continues: “I want to welcome all of you to this international, interdenominational gathering of Christians,” he says with a smile. “As you know our purpose over these next three days is to find some common ground... some areas of agreement... and to draft a confession of faith on which we can all agree for the years to come... impossible as that may sound.

We'll do it like this: each of you should have received a large card – red on one side, green on the other. As I read the following statements and ask for a vote, show me the green side if you agree, the red side if you don't. Then, we'll go to the next statement. All right? The first statement from our panel is this: “Jesus was born of a virgin.” Remember, green side if you agree, red if you don't. The camera slowly pans the sea of red and green cards, just about evenly divided. The moderator chuckles again, “It looks like a tie,” he says. “Let's move to the next statement and see if we can do any better.” But before he can say another word, an argument breaks out on the convention floor. News cameras converge on the action as one of the delegates shouts at another, “If you don't believe Jesus was born of a virgin you don't belong in this meeting!” He grabs the other man's card and tosses it like a frisbee. Soon all heck breaks loose with everybody pushing and shoving and snatching cards and screaming. The moderator ducks behind the podium as red and green cards rain down on the crowd and cell phones live stream the action. The next morning's newspaper carries the headline: Christian Convention Erupts in Violence: Delegates Disagree on Virgin Birth.” And in a downtown breakfast joint, a truck driver points to the picture as the waitress pours his coffee. “Will ya look at that? Ain't that the biggest crock you've ever seen? And my mother-in-law wonders why I don't go to church!”¹

¹ James G. Somerville, “With the world watching,” *Christian Century*, May 13, 1998.

Now there are two things about this story. It is fictional... but not untrue. It was made up by very creative Baptist preacher up in Richmond, VA... but it is “spot on” as it describes the climate and context the church is in today. How can we be church AND have such differing theological positions? How can we be church AND have such differing political commitments? How can we be church AND have such differing worship styles? How can we be church TODAY?

I’ve shared with some of you just how challenging it is to preach in today’s highly partisan and polarized environment. It’s almost as if our collective anxiety has gotten to the point that I feel like if I said, “Jesus tells us to love our neighbor,” somebody will accuse me of being pro-this or anti-that. Our partisan radars are on high alert and have been for some time now... so much so that we can hear one word said in a sermon or prayer or Sunday school class, and immediately decide a person is either conservative or libera... right or wrong – friend or enemy – no nuance or ambiguity allowed. Our preferred echo chambers - whether it be Fox News, MSNBC, or Facebook only fan the flames... so that more and more, it feels like we are being set up to be divided... we’re being socialized to look first for all the ways we do *not* agree... for all the ways we are different... for all the ways others pose a threat to the things we believe and hold dear.²

Is it any surprise then... that many of us come into this worship space each week with the assumption that in order to be a church together... in order to be a healthy community... we really need to all agree on just about everything... and if we don’t agree on just about everything, we just need to find a church where folks do. In other words, we mistake unity for uniformity... we confuse one-ness with same-ness... or as Rachel Held Evans said in the quote I put in the bulletin: we prioritize shared beliefs over shared relationship... when the truth is that we worship a God who would rather die that lose relationship with us. And when we do this (when we prioritize theological or political correctness) over relationship, we are in grave danger of losing touch with the promise that as long as our hearts are one in Christ, our minds don’t have to be.

Our nation is sadly fragmented, we all know this. Yet what we are concerned about this morning is that the church is sadly fragmented. There are tens of thousands of Christian denominations divided along doctrinal lines... though we have known it for a very long time, Sunday morning remains the most racially segregated hour of the week for many of us. Congregations divide over how to most faithfully worship... or whether to emphasize evangelism or social justice... or who to give power to... or whether to buy a new organ or build a Habitat house. The church is sadly fragmented... and according to Jesus, we need to deal with this so that the world will know that God sent him. The prayer Jesus offered up 2,000 years ago has not been answered. We are not “all one.”

And that’s a problem... because if we don’t show this unity... if we aren’t able to love one another... then the world won’t believe. Recent research shows very clearly that one of the

² Rev. Shannon Kershner in “One Body? The Question of Political Diversity in Church, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL.

main reasons folks outside the church give for not being inside the church is that Christians are too judgmental.³ And what I fear is that those who are inside the church – including the kids we confirmed two weeks ago and these graduating seniors who are leaving our nest – my fear is that if we cannot show unity... one-ness... love for one another... these kids who have grown up inside the church may begin to question whether they want to stay a part of it. If we cannot be one, then the world won't believe. Jesus said it's that simple.

Three days later the meeting hall of the "Christian Convention" is in shambles. Folding chairs are over-turned, and trash fills the aisles. The delegates look exhausted and sullen – many of them with bandaged heads and arms in slings. The moderator steps cautiously to the podium and announces in a tired voice: We will close our, um, meeting, with communion. Ushers will pass the elements from the aisle and we will all receive the Lord's Supper." And as the plates travel down the rows – passed from white to brown to black to yellow hands – passed from hands holding cards showing red and hands holding cards showing green – a silence falls on that room. And with everyone holding both the bread and the cup, a retired minister gets up from his chair, shuffles to the podium and invokes the ancient formula: On the night that he was betrayed Jesus took bread, and when he had blessed it he broke it, and said, "This is my body, broken for you." Then he stops, as if he has forgotten what to say next. And for several moments he stands there in that deafening silence, staring at the broken loaf in his hands. And from somewhere in front of him, a young woman whispers to the man beside her, "The body of Christ was broken for me." He hears it and whispers: "The body of Christ was broken for me." Then it ripples across the congregation like a sacred breeze, until every voice in that room is whispering in unison: "The body of Christ is broken for us." William Sloane Coffin once said: "Human unity is not something we are called on to create, only to recognize. God made us one, and Christ died to keep us that way." We ARE the body of Christ. We are HIS. Let us love one another so that people will notice and want to be HIS too.

³ Ministry Insite Priority Report – 2017 Quadrennium Report: "Top 10 Reasons for Considering NOT Participating in a Religious Congregation or Community