

That They Be One

John 17:21-23

Sermon

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“That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.”

In what has commonly been referred to as the Savior’s prayer, we are allowed enter into the intimate conversation between Jesus Christ and God the Father. Prior to entering into the sanctuary of the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus reveals his ecclesiological and eschatological vision for believers and the Church in the present and throughout the ages—that believers are called together to live in, near and with God in Christ; and to bear witness to God’s love and ministry of reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

As we consider on this day the persistent divisions in our world—whether it is the Jenjeweed and African Christians of the Darfur region in the Sudan, Jew-Christians-Muslim relations in France, Asia, Israel and Palestine, or racial, ethnic and cultural differences of our local congregations, Jesus offers an inescapable challenge to the Church, while expressing his confidence in believers through the power of the Holy Spirit. By lifting up and celebrating these words, we bring to bear the creative resources for building community and celebrating our differences in our love and adoration of God in Christ.

Of course the text never quite reveals the nature of this ‘oneness’—that the people of God would be one as God and Christ are one—what does that mean? Perhaps it is the

God consciousness of Schleiermacher by which all humanity seeks the infinite consciousness of God in our finite existence—that we are all one in our quest for the infinite in the finite; or perhaps it is to be found King’s beloved community or Tutu’s rainbow people of God, or even in Gustavo Gutierrez’s God of the eschatological horizon—

In this postmodern world in which we live, where individualism and compartmentalization promotes fragmentation and brokenness, the words of our Savior is both comforting and engaging. It gives powerful insights as to the nature and ministry of believers in local communities and the global Church.

Whatever this “oneness” with God and within humanity may mean, we cannot deny the urgent cry of Jesus in this text—not only as a passionate plea, but a theological imperative for Christian witness in our world today.

Which leads to the impatient question, what does this passionate plea from our Lord mean for us today? Or as Dietrich Bonhoeffer phrased the question, who is Christ for us today, particularly as it relates to this passage?

Well first, Jesus seems to be saying that our identity and personhood becomes intricately intertwined with others. That is to say, the more we find ourselves in authentic relationship with others, the more we discover who we are, and enter more fully into the life of God.

If ever there were a group of individuals who did not have it together, it was the disciples. In fact, Jesus foretells the moments ahead when Peter would betray him three times, and the other disciples would scatter. With this in mind, Jesus calls upon his divine unity

with God the creator knowing that oneness is not an immediate instantaneous process. It demonstrates the ongoing saga of salvation history.

There is something about our existence that is so orchestrated that we only know who we are through communion with others.

There is something about this existential apparatus we call life that is so creatively designed by the divine designer that we must somehow learn to live together even in the midst of our differences; that we may somehow be one!

There is an old African maxim that speaks to this when it says: “I am because we are” !!

John Donne captured this understanding when he said:

“No man is an island entire of itself; every man (or woman) is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”

Even Maya Angelou, the poets, raised her mighty pen and wrote in the poem: “Alone”

“Lying, thinking; Last night; How to find my soul a home; Where water is not thirsty; And bread loaf is not stone; I came up with one thing; And I don’t believe I’m wrong; That nobody, but nobody; Can make it out here alone.

And then she goes on to say:

“Now if you listen closely; I’ll tell you what I know; storm clouds are gathering; the wind is gonna blow; The race of man is suffering; And I can hear the moan; Cause nobody; But nobody; Can make it out here alone”—

This idea of oneness Jesus presents to us challenges that rugged sense of individualism we find in our culture today—where persons are relegated to merely agents of consumption and productivity; this couldn’t be more evident in the marketing strategies of today—“You deserve a break today” with McDonald’s.

However, in this passionate plea, we are able to recognize our inter-dependence on others. Anyone who has ever gardened understands that every leaf that grows and every flower that comes into being is somehow attached and indebted to the other for its very

existence. It is dependent on the other for its very survival. It's almost like a symphony, that while made of dramatically different sounds and textures, the difference and contrasting tones are what constitutes its beautiful melodies—in that sense, difference becomes imperative in the creative process.

Such is the case that in God's magnificent plan, there is a tapestry of togetherness, where we know more fully who we are in Christ through our fellowship and relationship with others.

And secondly, when believers become one, there is powerful energy that flows through us that brings forth powerful change in our surroundings. Think of the vine and branches in John 15, where Jesus says "I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower," and you are the branches!

Here, Jesus says "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." "If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for what ye wish and it shall be done unto you."

And this fruit, this creative energy that emerges from this mystical connection is what has the capacity to create change in our world through this intertwining connection with Jesus and God.

This *parachoreses* and *koinonia*, as the Greeks called it is where the power for transforming our community and a meaningful witness to Christ resides.

And perhaps it can be said that the greatest threat to our nation are not those who are considered "terrorist" but to the weapons of mass consumption—where communities and human persons are turned into individual consumers and agents of material culture.

But through our fellowship and mutual dependence on each other, we are able to break down economic and political disparities, where all share equally at the table of life and reality.

Herein lays a power that can confront the shame of history's past and pave a bright and magnificent future.

Herein lays the capacity to confront political and social injustice!

--to transform darkness into light and wrong into right!

--to lose the shackles of tradition and break the chains of complacency!

--to stand for truth and justice

--to shake up the unshakable and awaken them that sleep!

But I'm so glad that in becoming one with others, we are also becoming one with Jesus and God the Father! And herein lays the creative energy to confront the challenges before us, both individually and collectively.

Which brings me to my conclusion. That when believers become one, we are able to more fully realize God's presence in our world.

Herein lies the nature and mission of the church, not just for our time, but throughout the ages—that we should draw closer to God in mind, heart and spirit and in so doing, we draw nearer to one another.

Like two opposing points on the circumference of a circle, though far apart, as they move close toward the center, there is an inevitable meeting place of togetherness.

And in the final analysis, we all must kneel before the shadows of Calvary.—And as we reach up we are also reaching out to others in one great process of love and commitment.

And in so doing, we discover that as we hold on to God, God is holding on to us;
That even when we falter, God continues to keep a steady grip;
When we fall short, God's grace is sufficient.
When we grow weary, God's love keeps us strong.
When we are troubled in heart, the Lord of life will give us peace.
When we should feel discouraged, the Lord will give what is needed to continue on.
In the words of an old spiritual, "Sometimes I feel discouraged and feel my work's in
vein; but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again;
There is a balm in Gilead to make to wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead to heal the
sin-sick soul. Amen.