

As We are One

Menno Mennonite Church

May 21, 2023

Purpose: To explore the call of the church to emulate the way of being present with God

Message: Of all that Jesus prayed for prior to his crucifixion it is that the church might know its identity in being one.

Scripture: John 17:1-11 (I will read)

Synopsis: In the weeks of the resurrection we are sometimes invited to go back in time and look at that which happened before with different eyes. By holding on to the back story in the light of the resurrection we are given a different vantage point around which to see with context the truer meaning of what was being said. Jesus' prayer for the disciples is just such a thing. Going into what he was about to suffer his prayer was first for himself, and secondly for those who would carry on the ministry after him, asking that they might share with the Spirit what he shared with the father. The oneness of the Spirit is not a unity of uniformity, enforcing the singularity of thought and idea, but rather a singularity of love and purpose. Living in and through that love is the highest call of all disciples then and now.

Notes: [sermons seeds](#)

John 17:1-11

17 After Jesus had spoken these words,
he looked up to heaven and said,

“Father, the hour has come;
glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,

² since you have given him authority over all people,
to give eternal life
to all whom you have given him.

³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you,
the only true God,
and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

⁴ I glorified you on earth
by finishing the work that you gave me to do.

⁵ So now, Father, glorify me
in your own presence with the glory
that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶ “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world.
They were yours, and you gave them to me,
and they have kept your word.

⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;
⁸ for the words that you gave to me
I have given to them,
and they have received them
and know in truth that I came from you;
and they have believed that you sent me.

⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world,
but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.

¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.

¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world,
but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.

Holy Father, protect them in your name
that you have given me,
so that they may be one, as we are one

Sometimes there are stories that we connect to better once we know how it all pans out. Going back and hearing the words again with how things turned out in the end lends a far different shading to nuance of the story once the whole has been revealed and we have the whole puzzle put together. Star Wars takes on a different spins when—spoiler alert—we learn that the man behind the mask of Darth Vader is, ultimately Luke’s father (a joke I rarely tire of making with my own son). The connections and back story webs together the whole family and changes the good versus evil story into something far more complicated than the simple good guy/bad guy routine that one might expect. As debatable as the subsequent 8—don’t quote me; I have long since stopped counting—movies may have been as prequels and expansions of the franchise, knowing something of what came before still changes the story as it was first told and put together. Not only does the information of what comes before in expand the universe that is created, it changes where we have already been for the meaning that we now understand in new light and new ways.

We are still in the season of Easter, at least according to the Lectionary. Rather than building to the peak of Palm Sunday and Easter and then to leave everything behind, we are given the season of easter, dwelling with what happens following the resurrection and coming toward the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost—that’s next week by the way. Along the way it takes us back to the just before the passion. You can be excused for finding yourselves confused at the out of order arrangements here—we had just talked about this—but I would invite you to hear this again with the ears of the resurrection, and the mind of the prequel. How often did those who were charged with carrying the Gospels forward hold onto these moments, these reflections with new understanding, insight and affection in light of what they now know, what they are now experiencing? Might they cast their minds back to the garden just before the worst happened to draw strength and power that they didn’t even realize they gained the first time they lived it?

For those reading John’s account of Jesus written nearly 80 years after the events themselves these words must have been a lifeline in the midst of what they knew then and the world they were then experiencing. The theological disagreement over the nature and identity of the Messiah that had fractured the early church within the Jewish tradition had fully blossomed into the chasm we sadly know today. The cultural connection into the world of the empire and its demands had erupted into outright persecution. The contentions of developed ideas around the tradition and nature of what it means to follow Christ had taken shape and form. All these

forces and more shape John's gospel, and give us this extended version of the happenings of the Passover/passion experience perhaps because the church had learned the formative nature that those moments would take for the life that they were living. This prayer, sandwiched as it is between the final instructions given to the disciples that were being left behind and the coming of the mob to carry Jesus away is the summative statement of the earthly ministry of Jesus on this side of what was about to be. Accordingly, the work is to give account of what has been to the one who had authored it, and to hand those who would carry on the work into the hands of the God who held all things together.

In John, this is the model of prayer we are given from Jesus. John doesn't repeat the instructions of the Lord's Prayer in its forms and calls, but instead reveals a prayer of the master himself. Its content and priorities are indeed telling: he prays for himself and for those for whom he cares, and connects both realities to the reality that matters most—in connection with the source and life of all things and all hope. Jesus' prayer is centered in God and moves to connect those who would come after to that center as its singular vision, hope and purpose come what may. In praying for these priorities, Jesus is bringing flesh to the greatest commandment that he himself identified—to love God and to love your neighbor, uniting both in his expression of intent and hope.

Only through his divine union will he be able to finish what was started at his birth; only through the disciples entering into that union will they be empowered and sustained to follow him wherever their ministry leads. This is a unity with God, yes, but almost equally important with each other that makes ministry possible. Jesus knew what he meant the disciples; the church to do—to go into a world that did not and would not understand them and to work to reform it not by power and principle but by way of the example of washing feet and suffering all that would come their way. This work, this purpose that is ours still, cannot be accomplished by way of singular individual effort or performance, but asks that we connect ourselves to that which is bigger—the body who works with us and the Christ who is the head of the same body.

How often, I wonder, do we connect the working of the Spirit in our lives with the work of our unity as the church? We have good practice in connecting our spiritual health and vitality to our ability to connect to the source of the faith that is ours and how we feel about the process. The love that Jesus hopes and prays for his disciples—those present with him and those who would follow in our own times—might seem woefully aspirational in the here and now, but is,

itself essential for the reign of Christ to be known in the world. It is essential because it is the demonstration of that very reign itself—that love lays at the core of all things, and that the reign of love must be realized in the world so the kingdom of incarnation and union might be known and revealed to those who can only know the work of the kingdom from the habits they see of those living it now. Christ centered unity is not a nice-to-have but is the singular depiction of the kingdom to a watching world.

Note here that what is prayed for is unity; not uniformity. I think we are quick to get these confused. The reign of God is characterized by the orientation of one's life toward the goal that is the kingdom. That directionality and singularity of purpose finds its incarnation in many forms and functions. The metaphor of the church is the bride of Christ is apt; it reaches for the intimate knowledge and sharing of life where the two have become one, united in life and purpose. Yet we know that marriage is at its best when the two who are joined have the space to be who they are in their own distinctiveness while being united for the best interests of the single whole. We all know that marriage involves any number of negotiations of ways, means and meaning, but always must be lived in the purpose of knowing full life together in the good and the bad.

In the same way, the many ways of being church—and here I am meaning church in its biggest universal sense, not solely the congregational sense—must celebrate the diversity of expressions as they each serve the broader unity of the Spirit in service to the one God. Jesus' prayer here is not that the disciples might all be the same; it is that they might all be one in their connection to God and God's kingdom. Even the Trinity celebrates and amplifies God's distinctiveness in each Person. The disciples were called with their unique, beautiful, and messy personalities, characteristics, gifts, and traits. Curious Thomas has a role. Questioning Phillip has a purpose. Simon brings all that he is as he has been appointed to be Peter. Mary Magdalene continues to exercise her leadership in her persistent presence bearing witness to what she has seen even when she might be challenged as a witness.

It is often lamented that the splintered body of Christ fails in its representation of the resurrected reality of Christ. In many ways that is true. Being human, we are given to the pronouncements of those with whom we disagree as beyond the pale and outside the sense of oneness that is ours because their ideas are beyond our imagination, and vis a versa. Our fellowships will break, our ideas will diverge, and there are times that this cannot be avoided.

We should not deny the places where our ways diverge to such an extent that continuing closely would do harm as it often has, and still does.

Yet we must always remember that the reality that we live is not that of the body broken, but the broken body living still by and through the glory of God. What if even in the midst of our disagreements we would continue demonstrate abiding love to the best of our ability, separating where we must, but blessing and connecting where we can, even where disagreement is present (perhaps even because it is present)? What if we brought those principles of love, reconciliation, and mutual well wishing in the body as well as outside of it? What if the resurrection was not just a reality lived in individual surety but as the lived reality of the communities that we build, tend and bless along the way? How might we bear witness to the resurrection then?

Jesus prayed for us at the very last; what if we believed in the aspirations of this prayer not just as fine ideals, but as a shaping guide for life and living? I in you; and you in me. And all of us—all of us; on in the God who made us and calls us to life even when death seems the rule. That is a life worth living and a church whose witness would be known as a light to be admired by all who would see it.

May we be one in prayer and in life to the glory of God.