

A Prayer for You
John 17:6-23

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In John's gospel, after Judas leaves the Last Supper, Jesus begins a discourse that runs from the end of chapter 13 to this prayer, a portion of which we read today. We ascribe a certain importance to these chapters because they are Jesus' final words to his disciples. Immediately after Jesus finishes this prayer, Roman soldiers arrest him. There is some significance that this is the last prayer Jesus has with his disciples before his death. What Jesus prays for must be immediately important.

This first phrase that jumps out at me is that Jesus is praying for all who will believe in Him. "I ask not only on behalf of these," Jesus prays in verse 20, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word." **Jesus is praying for you.** Jesus is praying, right before his arrest, for you and me. We are the community for which Jesus prayed. We are the ones who have believed because of the words of the apostles. Jesus knows it will not be long until he ascends to the Father and is physically absent from his disciples. So Jesus entrusts the future of his disciples, both then and now, both them and us, to God.

So what specifically does Jesus pray for us? **Jesus prays for unity.** Jesus is asking the Father to protect the disciples so that they may be one, just as he and the Father are one. What does it mean when he prays for His disciples to be one? Is he praying that they never disagree? Certainly not, for Jesus disagreed with his disciples often. Disagreement and theological discourse are good. That is how the Rabbis learned in Jesus' day; they argued (in the best sense of the word) back and forth about the meaning of scripture. Does Jesus want the disciples to have no preference in style of worship, theological emphasis, geographical location, or remembrance of his teachings? If this is so, then the disciples failed. And if oneness as a lack of variation in personality or calling is what Jesus meant, then Jesus obviously didn't want faith in Him to spread very far. We know this cannot be true, for the disciples were sent out to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

I believe when Jesus prays for our unity, he prays that we will have hearts full of love for God and full of love for our neighbors, hearts set on the purpose to which God has called them. Just as he and the Father are united in heart and purpose, Jesus prays for us to be united in heart and purpose. This oneness in heart and purpose as Christians is going to be so important when persecution comes. And it is coming for these disciples, so it is crucial that they are united in their faith and in their love for each other.

Jesus prays that we will be one because Jesus is sending us into the world. We lose our witness if we are not one. This is critical. If we are not one in heart and purpose in Christ, the world cannot hear what we are saying or see what we are doing. The world only sees our disunity and will not be compelled to join us.

About 15 years ago now, Jack and I were invited to dinner at our neighbors' house. We were both young couples, all working professionals. We all enjoyed gourmet cooking and movies. But, just after we arrived that night, this other couple got into a fight over what the exact consistency of the margaritas should be. They bickered back and forth the rest of the evening. This proved true every time we would get together with them. It was uncomfortable to watch them bicker and so our get-togethers became less and less frequent.

Many non-believers feel this way about the church. Our lack of visible unity, in the PC (USA), in every other denomination, and across denominational lines makes us unattractive to those outside, and fellowship with us is not desired. Can you blame them? Where there are divisions, where there is exclusiveness, where there is competition between churches, the cause of Christianity is harmed and the prayer of Jesus is frustrated.

You may have heard this week about the softball game between Central Washington University and Western Oregon University. An Oregon player hit her first home run. As she was running the bases, however, she fell and tore up her knee. She was unable to finish running the bases and so her hit would only count as a double. What happened next was incredible. Two players from Washington asked the umpire if they could carry her around the bases. The umpire said yes; only her team was forbidden to assist her. So they, her opponents, carried her across home plate and the hit counted as the home run it was. Washington lost that game according to official scoring, but they really won it. Their camaraderie with even an opposing player shocked and delighted the world.

So, how do we show our oneness? Again, I do not believe oneness calls us to be the same in organizational makeup, worship style, theological or practical emphasis, geographic location or ethnic makeup. We are to be one in heart and purpose with Jesus Christ. Therefore, we love. This love thing comes up quite often in Scripture, doesn't it? In spite of every difference, we love one another. I know what I am asking. It is much easier said than done, especially when I am right and you are wrong. We are at odds over serious issues and we are passionate people. Theological difference does not preclude love however. We will never all agree. We will never all want to do the same things in the same way. But we love and

put up with, and even compromise with each other because we all love Jesus. We love and so we help one another. I believe oneness can only happen supernaturally, by the power of God's Spirit. Maybe that is why it is a concern for prayer time. Jesus knows it will take a miracle. And if Jesus prays for oneness, we certainly should.

Note with me the reason Jesus prays for his disciples to be one. It is so that our joy may be complete. **Jesus prays that we may be filled with his joy.** The joy of the Lord is our strength, Nehemiah reminds us. It amazes me how unjoyful the church can be at times. In a society where it is perfectly acceptable to jump out of our stadium seat or recliner at home and yell "Touchdown!" or to go shirtless in 20-degree weather having painted our whole body the color of our favorite team, it is not so acceptable in religious matters. If we do show real joy in worship in the Presbyterian Church, we are accused of being either irreverent or charismaniac. But, we have a reason to rejoice. Christ is risen; He is risen indeed!

Max Lucado relates a story he calls "Joy in the Journey" about a plane trip that he took. The woman whom he providentially sat by was rural. He was urban. She was backward and he was sophisticated. "They sure do put these seats close up against each other don't they," she said as she sat down. She had basset hound cheeks and she smiled so broadly that Max could see the cavities in her molars. She wore a Dutch-bob haircut and a blue, velour pants suit. She looked old and she had never flown before. "I don't do this much do you?" she asked Max. When he told her he did, her eyes widened. "Oooh, that must be fu-un." Max groaned to himself. He already had a bad attitude because of a toothache. He had inadvertently left his toothache medicine at his hotel. He had loads of work to do and now he was sitting next to Gomer Pyle's mother. "Oooh boy, look at that one!" she exclaimed regarding the plane ahead of him on the runway. During takeoff she got quiet but then suddenly she let out a sound that would have called the pigs for dinner. "Oooooe, those trees down there look like peat moss." People seated around Max turned and stared like he was E.F. Hutton. When the drinks came around, Max asked for a Coke and she asked for the list. Twice. When they brought her her drink, she exclaimed that she did not know apple juice came in cans. This went on the whole flight. If she wasn't staring out the window oohing and aahing, she was playing with her fan, turning her light off and on, and savoring her lunch. They hit some turbulence and Max looked over to see if she was going to scream. She was grinning like she was riding the Ferris wheel at the county fair. Then it occurred to Max. She was the only one enjoying the trip. The rest on the

plane we too sophisticated to have fun. It does little good, Max thought, to make the trip but to miss the joy in the journey.

The joy Jesus prays for you stretches far deeper than the baser pleasures the world seeks. Jesus wants for us, His unified followers, the joy of creativity and productivity, the joy of service and benevolence, the joy of knowing the truth, the joy of being in right relationship with God together. So if you can't help clapping in praise for the gift of the choir's music that's just fine. There is too much joy not to respond. If your pastor can't help dressing up and making a fool of herself to honor some of her wonderful members of whom she is most proud, don't worry – she is not crazy. There is just too much joy to contain it. If you can't help singing while you work, because you believe that God is with you and for you, sing away, and don't let the odd stares bother you. There is too much joy not to let it out somewhere.

We are to be a joyous people. We are to be a united people. Jesus prayed this fervent prayer for his disciples. Jesus prayed this prayer for you. Jesus prayed this prayer for me, and I am so thankful that you are the people with whom I get to be one and yell "Touchdown" with every once in a while.