

“That They May Be One”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
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**John 17: 20-26**

I believe one of the hardest concepts for us to grasp, or that we feel will come to reality, is the idea of unity. We live in a world that has so many different viewpoints and cultures and ever-changing characteristics, that it seems impossible to think that we would ever achieve or experience unity. We just completed our primary elections here in Indiana this week. As it stands right now, the two presumptive presidential candidates for the general election each have the highest disapproval ratings in over forty years. This should be a fun six months, huh?!

It's just as much of a challenge in our life as the church. I believe one of the most provocative questions elders, deacons, and ministers are asked upon their ordination or installation to service in the Presbyterian Church is: “Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?” How do we further the peace of the church when we are always debating and arguing about theological issues? How do we further the unity of the church when we are such a diverse mix of backgrounds and viewpoints – all of us, each of us, made in the image of God our Creator? And what does it mean to further the purity of the church?

Is unity – in this world, in our community, in the church – a realistic goal anymore? I don't think it's realistic to define unity as all of us believing exactly the same thing. So, what does it look like, then? How are we called as the Body of Christ to show unity to a world that is full of discontent and brokenness?

In our passage from John today, Jesus is keenly aware of how important unity is, both for his disciples' faith at that time, as well as for the future faith of the church. It's important to note where this passage comes in the Gospel of John. If you have a Bible that shows all of Jesus' words in red, like this one, you would notice that for five straight chapters (13-17), all the text is in red. It is Jesus' farewell speech, as it were, and in John's account, all of this takes place in the upper room on the night of Jesus' arrest. These five chapters include: Jesus washing the disciples' feet; sharing the last supper together; Jesus reassuring them of the Holy Spirit's future arrival; his command to love one another; and for them to know that the way to eternal life is through him, for Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. All of that is part of this long discourse, before Jesus faces his passion and death.

But what is interesting is that this last chapter, chapter 17, is not a discourse or set of teachings by Jesus. It is a prayer. Chapter 17 begins, “After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said . . .” (17:1). Jesus prays for his disciples, for their faith, for them to have strength –

in the hours and days ahead, as well as for the time that is to come after his ascension into heaven. And in a very real way, Jesus is praying for us today. “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those *who will believe* (my italics) in me through their word” (17:20). Jesus’ prayer is for those in that upper room, and it is for all who will believe in him through those disciples’ testimony. And what does he pray for? “That they all may be one” (17:20).

As Belton Joyner notes, there are three main themes that emerge from this prayer of Jesus. The first is belief: Jesus prays for those who have believed in him (17:20), those who will come to believe because of the disciples’ ministry (17:21), and for all the world, “so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17:21). *Belief here means more than accepting cognitive information. Belief means recognizing that Jesus has been sent by the one he called “Father” (17:23). John Chrysostom argued that the world could come to such belief by observing the transformed lives of the followers of Jesus. He wrote, “And how will they believe this? ‘Because,’ Jesus says, ‘you are a God of peace.’ And, if therefore the (disciples) keep that same peace that they have learned (from me), their hearers will know the teacher by the disciples . . .” The challenge of living faithfully is not only a call to personal goodness; it is a call to let our lives invite others to follow Jesus* (F. Belton Joyner, Jr., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 543).

The second theme is oneness or unity. Throughout this passage, Jesus prays for those who believe in him to be one, just as he is one with God. “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one . . .” (17:22-23). Why is this important, this unity in Christ? “So that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:24). It is through this unity that belief is formed in God and in God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Joyner asks: *Can we imagine what the Lord felt as he moved inexorably toward his own death and still saw squabbling and power plays among his followers? For that matter, can we imagine what the Lord feels today as he observes (our) denominational (squabbles and conflicts)? The importance of unity among believers is that such oneness leads the world to believe (17:23). The counterpoint of that truth is that the world does not believe in Jesus because the world sees partitions among the followers of Jesus . . . The ultimate unity of the church is not in human maneuvering but in the oneness of God (17:21) (ibid).*

The third theme that emerges from this prayer is love. *Five times within these six verses, Jesus names “love” as the key descriptor of divine relationships (verses 23, 24, 26). Love is the bond within the Godhead (17:23-24). Love is the divine gift to the disciples (17:23). Love is the magnetic grace through which God seeks to attract the world (17:25-26). Love is the ingredient that the Lord prays will be within his followers (17:26).*

*These prayers might seem like sentimental mishmash if we did not know how the story ends. The love for which Jesus prays is cross-shaped love.*

*There is indeed glory in this loving unity (17:22), but the glory cannot be separated from the crucifixion. It is self-giving love that is resurrected into new life. The Song of Solomon claims that “love is strong as death” (8:6). The eternal Christ prays that his disciples might be “with me where I am” (17:24). This is no small matter, considering that he was on his way to this death (ibid, 545).*

I asked earlier if unity is a realistic goal anymore. In light of Jesus’ prayer, it should not just be a goal of ours as Christians, it should be our life’s mission. For it is in this last theme that the clear intention of unity in Christ is revealed: it is because of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ that we are called to love others, so that we may be one. That does not mean we will always be of one mind on everything. That does not mean we must be in lock-step agreement on every detail or minutia. It does mean that we will live our life with the foundational tenet of faith that God has loved us just as God has loved his Son, Jesus Christ (17:23). And because of that, we will seek in our life as the church and in our life as individual disciples to bring about the peace, unity, and purity of the Body of Christ in this world. For we are the proof of Jesus’ prayer: we are the ones who believed in his word and in the word of those who bore witness to him (17:20-21).

What does it look like to bring about this unity in Christ that Jesus prays for? How are we called “to let our lives invite others to follow Jesus?” How might we bear witness to the one who has loved us, so that all may be one?

In Princeton, New Jersey, there are two Presbyterian congregations. There is Nassau Presbyterian Church, which is the larger and predominantly white congregation. And there is Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church, which is the smaller and historically and predominantly African-American congregation.

In 1879, the Rev. William Robeson was called as pastor of the Witherspoon Street church. If that name sounds familiar, Rev. Robeson’s son, Paul, was a singer and entertainer of some renown during the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s. The Robeson’s were actively and fervently involved in the Princeton community for 21 years, and Rev. Robeson was a tremendous orator and pastor for the Witherspoon Street congregation.

However, in 1900, the Presbytery of New Brunswick met to consider the dissolution of Rev. Robeson’s call to the Witherspoon Street church. A commission of the presbytery recommended “. . . that there is a misfit at the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church, and that it is useless for Mr. Robeson (any) longer to continue in that field” (Minutes of the Presbytery of New Brunswick, September 17, 1900). Why was this the case? Because Rev. Robeson advocated for the rights of African-Americans in the Princeton community, and that was threatening and disruptive to the white majority in Princeton. Despite vocal opposition from Rev. Robeson, the Session, and other leaders of the church, the call between Rev. Robeson and Witherspoon Street church was dissolved effective February 1, 1901.

Why am I sharing this story of discord and strife with you? Because that is not the end of the story. Two years ago, this painful event in the church's history was brought to the attention of its interim pastor. And through conversations and digging in historical documents, it was determined that the presbytery had acted unjustly over one hundred years ago. The Presbytery of New Brunswick and the Synod of the Northeast sought to right this wrong, and the presbytery passed a resolution on September 8, 2015, which stated, in part, that the Presbytery of New Brunswick "expresses its regret over the dismissal of the Reverend William D. Robeson from the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church and hereby apologizes to the Pastor and Session of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church and its members and the family of Rev. Robeson for the hurt and hardship caused by this action" (Resolution passed by the Presbytery of New Brunswick, September 8, 2015).

A service of reconciliation was held two weeks ago at Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church. It included representatives from the presbytery, synod, Nassau Presbyterian, Princeton Seminary, and others in the Princeton community. The worship service was an opportunity to bring before God the pains and wrongs of the past, to ask for forgiveness, and to move forward in hope and love and Christian unity. And part of the Belhar Confession was read in unison, which says: "The unity in Christ is both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ . . . which must be earnestly pursued and sought." For a community that has always struggled with racial and economic divisions, it was a moment for the Princeton community to strive for unity in Christ through God's love for them.

But what makes this story personal for me is that that interim pastor who learned of this story two years ago was my uncle, David Prince. The conclusion of the presbytery resolution reads: "Lastly, the Presbytery of New Brunswick offers this resolution in gratitude for all who have worked to preserve and correct and proclaim the history of Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church to the glory of God through the years and in honor of the memory of the Rev. William Robeson for his faithful service, and the Rev. David Prince who made this resolution a priority and a goal of his in the last year of his life" (ibid).

Unity is not easy. It requires reconciliation, persistence, and selfless love. And it may not always be achieved in our lifetime. But it is our Lord's prayer - for us and for his church. May we not be afraid to live lives that invite others to follow our Lord, so that we may all be truly one.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.