

Jesus' Prayer for His Bride

8/23/26

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John 17:20-23

Good morning First Presbyterian Church! It is a joy to bring the Word to you this morning! The Scripture text this morning comes to us from John 17:20-23, read from the English Standard Version. All of my other verse references come from the English Standard Version as well. Preaching today's text is like trying to describe the Grand Canyon, El Capitan, or Big Sur to someone. It is truly in vain unless we have help to visualize and imagine some semblance of the beauty we are beholding. Praise God, we do have help - we have the Holy Spirit! Let's take a moment to ask for His help to perceive the beauty of the truths and let them transform us as I believe they have the power to do.

Prayer for Illumination

(Pray)

Today's passage comes from the "farewell discourse" of Jesus in the upper room during the last supper, just hours before his crucifixion. This is the closing section of this discourse in which he prays for himself, for his disciples, and finally what we're about to read, which is for us. Let's hear these words.

John 17:20-23

²⁰ "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,
²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be
 in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given
 me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in
 me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and
 loved them even as you loved me."

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Intro

Our text today is Jesus' final prayer in his "farewell discourse." Jesus' "farewell discourse" takes place at the passover feast. This was no ordinary passover, however, because as recounted in the gospels, there is no lamb mentioned, only bread and wine. Why is this? Jesus knows that at this passover, he will be the lamb who by being slain, will cause the angel of death to *pass over* the people of God. Remember this story in Exodus?

So Jesus knows that these are the final hours he will have with his disciples before he is given over to be tortured and killed on a Roman cross. Jesus takes this sacred time to express his great love for his disciples, to teach them what they will need to know to endure what is coming, and to pray for them. In the closing portion of this discourse, Jesus prays for us. For you and me. We are those who will *believe through the word* of the apostles. So what is the heart cry of the Son of God in the final minutes of

his final hours with his disciples? That you and I—that we the church—would be united. That we would be bound together by love and truth by the living, Triune God. Do you want to do the will of Jesus? Do you want to see a great breakout of the hope of the gospel in our day, in our city, in this late hour in salvation history? Lean in and let's plumb these depths together.

I want to look at this unity from three angles this morning if you are a notetaker or want to have a mental map of where we are going. I want to address these three questions regarding unity. 1.) What kind of unity is Jesus praying for? 2.) Why does Jesus desire and pray for this unity in the church? 3.) How does this unity ultimately happen? We're looking at "what," "why," and "how." Let's start with the what.

What Kind of Unity?

What kind of unity is Jesus describing here? It has 1.) an essential focal point and 2.) a profound depth. I will address these two aspects. Let's start with the notion that it has an essential focal point. What is our unity built around as those who believe through the word of the apostles? Well let's look at verse 20. This prayer and unity is for *"those who will believe in me through their word."* It is important that we acknowledge what Jesus is almost saying as an aside here, but it's monumental. The church to come—his bride that he is praying for and therefore us here at First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek—are those who believe in him *through the word of the apostles*. What is this word? It is the testimony of the Scriptures! Jesus is saying that how we come to understand who he is and how we are saved is a result of hearing the Scriptures

preached and read. This is God's plan of salvation and this is why we emphasize the word read and preached here at First Pres. As Paul says in Romans 10:17: *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.* !

So our unity is and only can be around the revelation of Jesus given to us through the word of the apostles. Look at verse 22 with me as well. *The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one.* What Jesus is referring to here is the revelation of who he is to his people. He is saying that we are those who bear the truth of who Jesus is, and that that is our cause for unity. Our mission statement at First Pres is "To share God's love and grace with all people and celebrate the truth of Jesus Christ." This is a good mission statement, but for it to deepen our unity it must be the *sole reason* that we gather together. It's great that we like each other, and it's great that we are Presbyterian, and have many other things in common, but if we are going to be on mission and have the unity Jesus is praying for, it must be because our eyes are not distracted or drawn to any other source of unity other than his glory and gospel. Satan can and does seek to divide the church, and so we must be on guard and stand against that, but one of his other strategies is to unify Christians around the wrong things. This is VERY important. Friends, I want to ask you this challenging question today and I want you to seriously reflect on it. Why are you here at First Pres? If it is not because you believe or are at least open to the reality that Jesus is king and we are his ambassadors, then we will never experience the unity that Jesus is praying for. When Rachel and I said our vows, we committed to *forsake all others*, out of our loyalty and fidelity to one another. **As the bride of Christ, if we are to be a unified body as Jesus**

intends, then we must, by comparison, forsake all other areas of unity besides our unity around the truth of the lamb of God, the exclusive way of salvation, who is king of the universe—the Lord Jesus.

So that is our center of unity. What is to be the depth of the unity for those who have come to believe in Jesus through the Word of the apostles? Jesus prays *three times* in this short passage that we might *be one*. What does that mean? Jesus explains, he says *just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us. (v.21)*. What does it mean that the Father is in Jesus, and Jesus is in the Father? The early Greek church fathers called this “perichoresis,” which means “going around” or “encompassing.” It has the word “choreography” embedded in it, which has led theologians like Timothy Keller to call this the “dance of the Trinity.”

Let me ask you this question; what was God doing before the creation of the world? He was enjoying a dynamic dance of love within Himself! The dance of the Trinity, that is, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the reality of the Godhead loving and deferring to one another in bottomless love from eternity past on into unending perfect union. Friends, I cannot exaggerate this, but this indwelling love of the Trinity is the most consequential reality there is. It is from this love that you and I were created. It is from this perichoresis that we say not that God is loving, but that God IS love. (1 John 4:8) It is from this perichoresis that Jesus came and died for you and me, because of God’s great desire to exalt Jesus and Jesus’ great desire to please his heavenly father and the Spirit’s great desire to give new life to this world out of love for the Father and Son.

Church, hear me - when you love someone else in self-giving love in this church, you are participating in the deepest reality in existence, the dance of the Trinity.

Okay so if that is how union operates within the living, triune God, then how are we doing as the church in America in 2026? Not great. How about here at First Pres? Better I think! I know we love each other and this is beautiful. But can you see the opportunities to lean in further? To defer to one another out of worship for Christ in the pulsating dance of the Trinity. We are participating in the life of God when we allow our spirits to be one in love. You see, we're not meant to be like country club members who will mow each other's lawn when the other is out of town. We're meant to be like the marines who are willing to take a bullet for each other. Paul shows us what it looks like for the church to participate in this dance in Philippians 2. This text is self explanatory, but let's engage with his premise.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is

above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:1-11)

Paul gives us a roadmap to this unity. We'll talk more about the "how" in my third point, but I want you to see that the depth we are invited to, is to imitate the love our Triune God has within Himself and the love He has for us. We are to sacrificially love, lift up, and serve one another. We are to be known and have bottomless love for one another.

This is fundamentally different from the modern, western, late stage capitalistic, individualistic culture we have inherited. I just want to point out that our opportunities here are incredible. We have absolutely no competition in this age of isolation and loneliness. People are desperate to want to belong, be known, and have a purpose. If we can do this well, we will see people flood into this church and we will see deliverance from profound darkness and brokenness. This is radical. We should live together, see each other daily, pray for one another regularly, and open our hearts to one another. This is hard and won't happen overnight, but it should be the direction we are moving. And I see it happening! Our fellowship feels sweeter and deeper all the time. Have you noticed that in our after church coffee hour? Take a moment to notice what the Lord is up to when you join us for cake and birthday celebrations today after service! Let us be encouraged and keep moving forward!

Let's move on to our second point, why should we seek this unity?

Why this kind of Unity?

Jesus is revealing our God's desire by praying for unity in his final hours before his crucifixion. But why is this the thing he wants and emphasizes in his final hours? It is not just because it is pleasant for us to enjoy this kind of fellowship, although it is (Psalm 133). The Lord Jesus says why in his prayer. He prays in verse 21: *so that the world may believe that you have sent me* and again in verse 23: *so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me*. The purpose of this unity is that the world may know and believe that God sent Jesus and that they may know that the church is loved by God.

Catholic social activist and visionary Dorothy Day once said that *"we should live in such a way that our lives wouldn't make much sense if the gospel were not true."* **Jesus is making this point for unity in the church – our unity and love for one another should be so substantial that it only makes sense if there is a Triune God, a God of love that exists and pours His love into His church, ultimately displayed in the sending of His son.** This is our witness. And the failure of the American church in this area is a major reason why millennials and generation z have rejected the Christianity. But it doesn't have to stay this way. It can start right here in Battle Creek. A few chapters earlier, in the same setting in which this prayer takes place, Jesus teaches this: ³⁴ *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.* ³⁵ *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13:34, 35)

If you've been to a Maundy Thursday service, perhaps you recall that this name, "Maundy" comes from the Latin word commandment, because of this "new commandment" of Jesus, to love one another as he has loved us. He says that this is how the world will know we are his disciples. This is one of the primary means by which God intends for us to evangelize and to make disciples of all nations.

Let's take a moment to worship God with these truths. Jesus is saying that the world will know we are his disciples when we love one another, because it shows the world who *he is*. I was talking with a friend about joy this week and he asked me how I would define it. I told him that I think joy is what we experience when we realize that the greatest possible thing that could be true, is true. Is it not the best possible thing that could be true that Jesus, God the Father, the Holy Spirit, are endlessly loving and that our glorious God is inviting us to participate in that love NOW?

I pray that your heart is stirred by this. It is through this unity that the world will see that our father in heaven sent Jesus and it is through this unity that the world will see that we are loved by Jesus. This second statement is also true because people will see that we **MUST** be loved by God because the love with which we love one another is supernatural and must mean that God is involved in helping us love one another. (And God knows we need that sometimes!) This leads me to our final heading, *how* we can accomplish such a unity as this.

How do we experience this kind of Unity?

So all of this sounds wonderful doesn't it? We have a good thing going here church, but I want you to dream with me about what we could be. The answer is we

must step into the truth more profoundly and pray, pray, pray for the Spirit to empower us to see and experience what is embedded in today's passage.

Two people who like golf might strike up and enjoy conversation, but two lifelong professional golfers could connect on a far more extensive level and become best friends. How much more is this true for life with Jesus on the narrow path?

The degree to which we cherish Jesus will be the degree to which we cherish one another. So then the question becomes, how do we cherish Jesus more? We must know the truth, meditate on it, and pray for the Spirit to cause us to experience it more profoundly. Let's try doing this now.

I mentioned earlier that God is love, but will that stir the heart to cherish Jesus more if it remains that abstract? No. This is why Jesus doesn't pray for unity so that people merely know that God is loving, but that the church will be unified so the world may know that God *sent Jesus*. What does this mean? It means that we came with a cost and that God's love is *real*, not just hypothetical.

Jesus took on that cost for you and me. Our sin is so great that it deserves vast separation from God, but God loves us so much He absorbed the gap, He absorbed the cost. Jesus died for you and for me. We now know the degree of God's love, and what is that degree? Jesus' tells us in verse 23. He wants us to be unified so that the world knows that God the father has, "*loved them even as you loved me.*" Friends, I want us to meditate on this truth this week—actually for the rest of your eternal being. You are loved to the degree that God the father loves Jesus. How do we know this? Because God gave His only son Jesus *for you, for me*. You're only going to pay for something the

price that it's worth to you, right? What were you worth to God? God said we were worth the life of His only Son. There is nothing more God could give us to show His great love for us. Oh Holy Spirit, reveal the weight of this to us!

I want us to personalize this truth the way that Paul the apostle does in Galatians 2, when he says:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Paul here is speaking to one more unifying truth that I want to speak to this morning. We are not trying to be *existentially* unified with Jesus or one another, but *functionally* unified with Jesus and one another. Why? Because the Bible teaches we are *already* one with Christ and one with another, it is just a matter of us acting like it.

What I am referring to is the doctrine of union with Christ. Paul never refers to believers as "Christians" but as those who are "in Christ." What does this mean? The New Testament teaches that when we put our faith in Christ, we become unified with Him. This means that what is true of Christ becomes true of us. When God sees us, He sees His crucified righteous son because of our faith in Him. This is why Paul can say "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.*" Was Paul actually crucified? In himself no, but in Christ YES! This is how we are made right with God! We are united to Christ by faith and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

So what does this mean for the church? It means that if we are one with Christ, we are one with another. Or, as Paul says in Galatians 3:28, *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*. The truth is that Jesus' prayer was efficacious in that Upper Room in AD 33. We are bound up with one another spiritually, so we must begin to act the part that will inevitably come true at Christ's return. So here's our challenge—are we going to have our eyes open to the glory of what is already true, that we are living in the perichoresis of the Triune God, or are we going to sleepwalk through this life or settle for so much less?

This is a *real* invitation, friends. I want us to seriously consider the treasures we have in Christ and learn to cherish Him. I want us to forsake all others. And I want us to become a messier community because we are far more intertwined by love. Let's stop hiding from each other and pretending to be "good church people." We all have sin, we all have wounds, we all have shame. If we receive the fresh grace of the gospel, this allows us to give it to one another. Let's cherish Christ and one another. We will bear with one another because this pleases our Lord who loved us and gave himself for us.

This is Triune unity, lived out in everyday life in the church and it can happen here at First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek and I already see it starting to happen. We are united to Christ by faith and we are united to one another, let's embrace this truth and let it move us to profound love for Christ and one another. In the name of The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit. Let's pray.