

## That They May All Be One

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*Texts: John 17: 20-26*

Ah, beloved... How shall we open the word of God today? What words can we find, what meaning are we to look for in the face of the unspeakable?

Our hearts are broken into pieces yet again, and Jesus is offering a prayer for oneness. Our nation is fracturing into ever more jagged fragments, and Jesus is offering a prayer for oneness. Our world is once more being torn asunder by senseless wars, the church itself is bitterly divided, and Jesus is offering a prayer... for oneness.

Do even the prayers of Jesus fall on deaf ears?

Let's take a few moments to open up the text. These long passages in John can feel very abstract when we read them or hear them read, so let's unpack this one a bit.

Jesus prays: *"I ask not only on behalf of these," my disciples, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word—that they may all be one."*

In the gospel narrative, this prayer is prayed at the Last Supper, before Jesus' crucifixion, before his resurrection. But it's looking ahead to the time, post-Easter, when Jesus will depart and leave his followers to continue without him. That's the moment we mark today with the feast of the Ascension: the moment of his departure. Next week, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, poured out on the church as it now takes up the work of preaching, teaching, healing, and community building. So, we hear Jesus praying not just for his own immediate circle, but for those they will reach out to, and the next wave, and the next, in all directions, as the story of Jesus spreads from person to person, and new followers are drawn into the power and promise of the gospel.

And if that sounds like that could be a little chaotic, you're right. The church isn't an organization yet. It's a set of relationships. So as Jesus prays for this church that will be coming into existence, the first thing he prays for is oneness. *"That they may all be one."*

That's the motto of our denomination, by the way—the United Church of Christ. *"That they may all be one."* And there's no small irony in that, since the very existence of denominations reminds us of how fractured the Christian movement would become, even within a couple of generations. Today we depend on bylaws and committees and staff

and duly ordained clergy and all that fancy stuff to try to hold ourselves together. But Jesus doesn't pray about any of that. Instead, he begins to speak about relationships.

*“As you, Abba, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...”*

He prays about his own intimate communion with God, and his longing to share that communion with his followers,

*“I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.”*

This oneness, this community of love will itself become the message: the thing that gets the world's attention and announces that something completely new is at work:

*“...so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”*

This is what Jesus calls his “glory”—using that word in a way that turns the patterns of the world completely upside down. Usually when we think of glory, we think about triumph, we think about victory and winning and being exalted. But Jesus is talking about the “glory” of communion love, flowing from the heart of God to Jesus the Beloved, and from Jesus to his followers.

He's inviting his followers into the inner life of God.

This is his revelation to a world forever hungry for power and domination and privilege and possessions. In this world, God will always be assumed to be the most powerful, the most dominant, the ruler of rulers. But as Jesus prepares to be surrendered to these very forces of power and domination, his prayer is for God to be revealed *as God really is*, in Jesus the Word made flesh, and all those who follow in his way.

*“Abba, Righteous One, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”*

Who is God? God is love shared, and love received. A widening circle, an invitation into closeness and belonging.

It would be hard to overstate what a startling and revolutionary claim Jesus is making.

We tend to think of God as alone by definition—the one and only God, reigning in lonely splendor somewhere out in the vastness of eternity. But here Jesus is praying to someone whose inner life he intimately shares. Remember the words with which John opened his gospel:

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was **with** God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”*

In this revelation, the inner life of God is not glorious isolation, but deep, mutually indwelling communion love. An eternal WITH inside God’s very heart.

And because Jesus has been born into the world, this eternal community of love now bears the print of a human face—our face. In him our humanity has been brought into the very heart of God, reconciling us once and for all, and inviting us to share in God’s own nature. To be “in Christ” is to take part in this vulnerable, undefended love, love given, and love received, flowing from God to Christ to his followers to the world and back again.

And I’ll be honest, even as I say this, I’m thinking about what a challenge intimacy is for some of us, and specifically how hard it is for me personally!

I come from a family with a serious intimacy allergy—and I have the emotional scars to prove it! Maybe I’ve even inflicted them on some of you.

And so, I live with a heart that is always a little bit protected, a little bit guarded, a little bit afraid of other people.

I wonder how many of you know what this is like. I suspect there’s at least a little corner of loneliness inside each one of us, a part of us that feels, perhaps, unseeable, unlovable...

And if you’re nodding in agreement right now, then I wonder how it feels to hear Jesus pray that we might be drawn into the closest possible intimacy with God? I’ll go first: A little scary.

Yet this path that Jesus is offering is a path to the healing and wholeness of our wary spirits, marked as they are by all our many past hurts. As we are drawn gradually, gradually nearer to God, the alchemy of love begins to transform our old wounds into channels of healing. We are invited in to communion love, so that we can then become the transforming presence of that love in the world.

That is Jesus’ own prayer.

Yet two thousand years in... here we are.

Why is the world still so broken?

Why have so few heard Jesus' radical invitation to join the divine dance of grace? Why is human life still so deeply marked by separation and loneliness, anger and division?

Every mass shooting gives us a glimpse of hell... not because shooters are evil and beyond the human pale, or beyond the reach of God's grace, but because the isolation in which they live is hell itself—a denial of the ties that bind us one to another. This is the very same hell that tried to erase Jesus on the cross.

It failed. It is failing. It will go on failing. Christ is risen. God's love is vast and tireless.

But that love needs us! Don't forget, we're in Jesus' prayer too. Love needs people who can embody God's love and make it visible—who can weave God's purposes into world by the way we live in it.

All week my heart has been as heavy as a millstone. Except for one day—Friday—when the little bit of heaven that is the Friday Café unfolded as usual here at First Church. It began Thursday night, as neighbors began dropping off food for the next day's meal—each dish made with love in someone's own kitchen. At 9:30 the next morning, the core team arrived to set up—and what an amazing group of cheerful, generous, resourceful, hardworking folks they are! Then came the day's volunteers to help prepare and serve the meal and distribute essential items like clothing and toiletries. This past Friday we held a COVID booster clinic, so there were public health nurses and paramedics in the mix as well. And finally, our guests, our own beloved community, filing into Margaret Jewett Hall to get their meal, then gathering on the front lawn to eat and talk and share their lives. And woven through it all, a spirit of generosity and kindness—the answer to Jesus' prayer so many years ago. Arms wrapping around a father whose beloved wife died suddenly of COVID last year, leaving him and their 8 kids... Words of consolation spoken to someone who is struggling in life... A neighbor's favorite pulled-pork recipe lovingly made and lovingly given away to feed neighbors they may never meet. Clean socks and a clean shirt for someone who has no place to do laundry. So many individual acts of thoughtfulness and kindness coming together to make something that is greater than all of us: an icon, an image of God's inner life of communion love.

So... Do the prayers of Jesus fall on deaf ears? Only when the prayer falls on my ears, or your ears, and we can't bring ourselves to listen, we can't bring ourselves to act, we can't bring ourselves to open our hearts to God to be healed, transformed, and set free to live out our calling in the world as ministers of grace.

How will you become Jesus' answer to prayer today, and in the days to come? How will you let God's lovingkindness into your life, and how will you share that loving kindness with the world?

Let us turn now to our response of faith, as Dan leads us in prayer and candle lighting.

