

What Did Jesus Pray for You?     John 17:11,20-23     11/25/18

This morning is the last sermon in our Gospel of John series, at least for a while, as we'll do something different during Advent which starts next Sunday. We may pick up the rest of John later, but you can certainly read the remaining four chapters on your own if you'd like to know how it ends!

I received word this week that a colleague in ministry, Rev. Kenny Smith, had died. Kenny was the pastor of First Baptist Church in Vienna, Virginia while I was the Associate Pastor for Missions at the Vienna Presbyterian Church. We wanted to develop some fellowship between his African-American congregation and our mostly-white church, so we began doing home and yardwork projects together in our community about once a month. We then did some pulpit swaps, and began holding joint Good Friday services which continue to this day. A joint women's Bible study started, and we also began doing mission trips together in Haiti. This partnership entailed some risk, especially for Kenny, but it proved enriching for both congregations and I value the memories of it!

This kind of cooperative ministry between churches may be an answer to Jesus' prayer in John 17. The prayer is set on Maundy Thursday, at the end of Jesus' time with his disciples in the upper room. Listen for the main theme of the prayer as I read.

<sup>11</sup>*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.*

*20 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,<sup>21</sup> that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.<sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,<sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:11,20-23)*

The first thing that strikes me in this passage is verse 20, where Jesus prays, “ *I ask not only on behalf of these* (referring to the 11 disciples gathered with Jesus that night), *but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,<sup>21</sup> that they may all be one.*” Jesus was praying for us here! For you and me! And in particular, Jesus is praying that Christians like us would “be one”- that they would have a sense of unity. He asks for this five times in this prayer! In fact, he prays that their unity would resemble the unity that exists between Jesus and the Father (and presumably, the Spirit!). There is a complete intimacy within the Trinity, and a complete unity of purpose. Jesus prays for that kind of

unity to characterize us. That's a pretty high standard! But when we look at what has actually happened to Jesus' followers, we may have to conclude that Jesus' prayer wasn't answered after all!

It wasn't long at all until the followers of Jesus experienced conflict. The church almost splits in Acts 15, with a debate about what to do with Gentiles who wanted to follow Jesus. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is filled with the issue of divisions about all kinds of matters within that church. But somehow the church held together. In fact, there were no significant splits in the Christian church until 1054BC, when the Eastern part of the church split from the Western part to become the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox refused to accept the authority of the pope over them and refused to update the liturgy as mandated by Rome.

500 years later the Protestant Reformation sparked many more church divisions, so that today, there are literally thousands of Christian denominations! Thousands! In fact, there are over 20 Presbyterian denominations in the USA alone! Some of these Christian denominations refuse to have anything to do with others, and at times there has even been violence and persecution between them. However you slice it, it sure doesn't look like we're one!

In the 1940's and 50's Christians began to be troubled by these denominational divisions, believing that they did not represent God's will for his people. There were great debates about what Christian unity should look like. Should it be organizational, merging the denominations together? Or, should be entirely spiritual, showing respect and love for one another, and cooperating as we can? Meanwhile, the decisions of Vatican II in the Roman Catholic Church opened the doors to more cooperation between Catholics and Protestants. The World Council of Churches was formed in 1948 with the National Council of Churches being formed in the US a couple years later. Their goal was greater unity among Christian churches.

In addition, many mainline Protestant Churches formed the Consultation for Church Union in 1962, with a goal of merging major denominations into one Christian Church. Then there would be no more Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, and Baptists competing with one another; they envisioned one Christian Church. Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17 was part of the inspiration for this goal of organizational unity. Unfortunately, the church members of the participating denominations roundly defeated the plan for union adopted by the committee in 1970! They didn't want to lose their denominational identities. So organizational unity by merger doesn't seem to be in the cards.

However, there have been some positive signs of growing church unity, including a Protestant-Roman Catholic joint statement on salvation in 1999 that even included evangelicals. Such a thing would have been unthinkable 50 years before. And our own denomination has now entered into “full communion” with the United Methodists and United Church of Christ, meaning we fully honor each other’s practices and sacraments and that pastors in one denomination can serve a church in the others. In addition, the Roman Catholic Church began a week of Prayer for Christian Unity each January, inviting other churches to join in. You wouldn’t think that such an observance would be controversial, but when I participated in the Unity Week services in Merida, Mexico, I found that many Protestants and Roman Catholics were deeply suspicious of such services. Many priests and pastors who participated were criticized in their own congregations and denominations. Unity can be costly, but I believe it is important, because, according to Jesus, it is God’s will for his people.

Locally, we are blessed with an active Ministerium in Gettysburg, the group through which most of the cooperation among churches takes place. It includes Protestant, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and Evangelical churches. I have been moderator of this group for several years. We work together to meet community needs. The Gettysburg CARES homeless shelter and the Ruth’s Harvest feeding program, as well our voucher

program all came out of and are supported by the Ministerium. We also sponsor ecumenical worship services, such as the Thanksgiving service last week and the summer Amphitheater services. The Men's Interfaith Lunch, which this church sponsors, is another example of local ecumenical ministry, as are the monthly Church Women United lunches. Instead of the distrust and competition so common between churches in many communities, the level of respect and cooperation between churches here is a sign that Jesus' prayer for unity is being answered, at least in a small way.

The worldwide church of Jesus Christ faces tremendous challenges if we are to be faithful to our call to share the Good News of God's love through Jesus with all people, and to serve our communities. Meeting such challenges requires cooperation. Some of you may have seen the movie, "First Man," which tells the story of the Apollo 11 flight which landed on the moon. It focuses on the story of Neil Armstrong, the first person to walk on the surface of the moon. Michael Collins, the astronaut who piloted the command module, Columbia, as it orbited the moon, said this about the mission, "All this is possible only through the blood, sweat, and tears of thousands of people...All you see are the three of us, but underneath the surface are thousands and thousands of others." In fact, there were about 400,000 others who contributed to the Apollo 11 mission in some way,

including spacesuit seamstresses, radio telescope operators, parachute designers, engineers, doctors, mechanics, and computer geeks. Roughly 500 people worked on developing the spacesuits alone.

A tremendous level of cooperation and commitment to the mission was required to achieve their goal. And that same kind of unity and cooperation is required if the church universal is to fulfil its mission. Jesus says that because the unity of the church reflects our unity with God, it will help the world to know about God's love for all people. That's the goal of Christian unity. That the world will see and know God's love.

So, how do we acquire this kind of unity? It begins with prayer- that's what Jesus was doing in John 17. We should pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ and their work in other churches and in other countries, and for our unity. There is no doubt in my mind that Christian unity, whatever form it takes, will require an act of God, because of our strong independence and stubbornness! So we pray. And we can take advantage of opportunities to work and worship with other Christians. Participate in the women's and men's interfaith lunches. Work with Christians from other churches in the Gettysburg CARES homeless shelter, Ruth's Harvest, the Soup Kitchen, or by volunteering as a mentor with inmates. Go on a mission trip where you will encounter and work with

other flavors of Christians! Look for and take advantage of opportunities to work and worship with other Christians.

The unity of Christians has the potential to be a powerful witness in the world at this particular time in our country's history. I'm sure you are aware that divisions seem to be deepening among us, and that it is becoming next-to-impossible to have civil discourse about what is best for our society. In that context, cooperating and unified Christians may stand out and serve as an invitation to others to join with us!

The late 1960's was another time of deep division in our country. The Civil Rights movement, the war in Viet Nam, and changing sexual and gender norms fragmented our society. In the midst of that turmoil, Presbyterians crafted a document called simply, "The Confession of 1967," which is now in our Book of Confessions. The central theme of that confession is reconciliation and unity. I'd like to conclude this sermon by having us read a few sentences from that confession together.

Confession of 1967 (Inclusive Language Text, 9.20)

"God the Holy Spirit fulfills the work of reconciliation in human life. The Holy Spirit creates and renews the church as the community in which people are reconciled to God and to one another. The Spirit enables people to receive forgiveness as they forgive one another and to enjoy the

peace of God as they make peace among themselves. In spite of their sin, the Spirit gives people power to become representatives of Jesus Christ and his gospel of reconciliation to all.”