

Last week, I began the sermon by explaining that the reading we were hearing is a part of the “Farewell Discourse” – Jesus’ last words to his disciples just before he is arrested and crucified. In our reading for today, he concludes his goodbye with a prayer. He speaks directly to God, out loud. “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.”

And as Jesus is praying this prayer, Judas is meeting with the religious authorities who will purchase his disloyalty for thirty pieces of silver. When he finishes the prayer, he takes the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he is betrayed and arrested. “The hour” is indeed upon him.

So, in this final conversation and final prayer, Jesus is trying to reassure those who love him. On this night, he has washed their feet. He has issued the new commandment – “love one another as I have loved you.” And, of course, he has promised them the Holy Spirit.

The fact that we have access to this prayer is a gift. This is an intimate moment. There are not many times in scripture when we get to eavesdrop on Jesus communicating to God.

Jesus begins by claiming the relationship he has with God. He addresses God as a parent. He says, “⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.”

Then Jesus prays for his disciples. ⁶“[God,] I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you, . . . Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me.

I guarded them, . . . ¹³But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

And then, beautifully, Jesus prays for us. Well, he prays for the future believers. He says, “I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, ²¹that 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. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I 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.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The message of his prayer, reinforced on a personal level by looking back at the past, and among those who love him in the present, and those who will love him in the future is one hope, one longing, one earnest prayer: oneness.

“Holy Father, protect them... so that they may be one, as we are one.”

It is striking that on the night before his death—when betrayal is unfolding and the cross is hours away—Jesus’ repeated prayer is that his followers would be united as one. Not uniform but united. Not identical but intertwined. Not always of one opinion but bound together in love. It was his last request that they have such interconnectedness that they be seen as one people.

And yet, if we look at the landscape of Christian history, we see something very different.

For the first several decades, the apostles spread the word about Jesus, and believers received the news around the known world. In Africa, all the way to India, throughout the Middle East to Spain, the word traveled and house churches were formed.

But as they formed, conflicts and questions emerged. There were questions about Jesus’ humanity and divinity. The Trinity. There were questions about Jewish customs and

Gentile conversions. There were different opinions on the role of women and which day of the week to worship on. Hundreds upon hundreds of letters were written back and forth from the Apostles to the churches. Hundreds.

And for the first several centuries, councils were formed and debates were waged about theology and scripture and inclusion and equality. Those who “won” the debate grew in power. Those who “lost” faded into history.

A canon of scripture was decided upon over three hundred years after Jesus lived. What was left out of the New Testament included the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, the Acts of Paul, and the Apocalypse of Peter among many other letters.

The Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church co-existed for centuries, largely dominating the Christian landscape. Then, on October 31st, 1517 a professor of moral theology, Martin Luther, suggested, in writing, that the Catholic Church could be more moral, and the world has never been the same.

In the course of time since then, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of denominations have splintered off of other denominations. Lutherans and Anabaptists, and Anglicans and Calvinists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, then Quakers and Methodists and Disciples of Christ.

And why does the number of denominations keep expanding and growing? Well, mostly it has to do with the decisions about bringing a guitar and drum set into the sanctuary. Just kidding.

But honestly, we see denominations, sub-denominations, factions, tribes, and theological camps that split over carpet color, worship style, polity, and personalities. We see Christians who will cross an ocean to do mission work but won't cross the fellowship hall to talk to the person who voted down their idea to replace the church carpet.

This is not the oneness Jesus prayed for.

In the US today, there are over 200 different organized Christian denominations. We call ourselves Presbyterians, but to be specific, we are the Presbyterian Church (USA) or PC(USA). There's also the Presbyterian Church of America or PCA, the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, the Evangelical Presbyterians, the Cumberland Presbyterians, the Orthodox Presbyterians, the Reformed Presbyterians and many, many more. Each one has been created because they did not want to adhere to the rules of the denomination they broke from. One said, "We should not require or pastors to graduate from a seminary." Another said, "Women have no right to ordination." Another said, "marriage shall only be between a man and a woman."

Now, I'm not suggesting that we should all go back to our denominational roots and convert to Catholicism; nor am I asking everyone to become Presbyterians in the PC(USA). Denominationalism, at its best, can reflect different gifts and emphases. I like the diversity of worship styles and traditions. I learned a lot from growing up Southern Baptist with family who were American Baptist and United Methodist, but friends, at its worst, this fracturing of faith communities becomes a way of drawing lines Jesus never drew. It becomes a way of saying "us" and "them" inside the body of Christ. It becomes a way of protecting our preferences and our interpretations of scripture instead of practicing our calling to love one another as Christ loved us.

Jesus did not pray, "Father, make them Presbyterian," and Methodist, and Baptist, and Catholic, and non-denominational.

He prayed, "*Make them one.*" Despite their diverse backgrounds and personalities.

When Jews and Gentiles fought over rules in the first century church, Paul and Peter and others did not say, the best thing to do here is for you to worship in your way on Saturday with lox and bagels after worship, and for you to worship on Sunday mornings with bacon and eggs.

They said, in your common love of Jesus Christ, love one another. Be patient with one another. Be kind to one another. Greet one another with a holy kiss. And stop the infighting. It makes your testimony about Jesus look flawed and weak.

In the prayer, Jesus says something bold: that the world will come to believe in him *because* of the unity of his followers.

What does it mean to be one? Bible scholar N.T. Wright says, “In every letter Paul writes [to the early church], he is urging his readers to take seriously the responsibility to be forming already, in the present time, those multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic communities which [embody Jesus’ promise of the kingdom of God.]”

Diversity in the church is not a burden; it is a gift, and it is our calling. I don’t know how it got there, but in our Annual Reports, there is a 300-year-old quote that you may know, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in diversities, charity; in all things, Christ first.”

Our church is not perfect, but there is something about it that appeals to a diverse people. Of our seven new members, two are coming from a Congregational church. Two are from a Lutheran background. One has a Catholic background. One has a Baptist background. No one was Presbyterian. And that is what I love about this Presbyterian church. That is what makes us beautiful. Our spiritual diversity makes us one in the ways that matter – in our love for Jesus Christ, our love for our neighbors, and our love for each other. We are allowed to be ourselves here. To see things differently here. To use different words in the Lord’s Prayer here. To long for the way it was done at a different church here and to disagree with me here.

But we are living in a very unique time in history. We have a pope who was born in America. We have young adults interested in the church in ways their parents were not. And in the United States, there are two groups of Christian denominations – the “evangelicals” and the “mainlines” who are interpreting the scripture very differently than each other.

We are not one. We are many. We are at odds with each other. No wonder Christianity is seeing such decline in numbers around the world. Jesus’ prayer for unity and oneness has not been lived out by Jesus followers. I can only hope that heaven is more beautifully blended and whole than we are, but I am proud to be your pastor in this place that practices oneness in unique ways. Amen.