

ONE

Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
February 1, 2004

Last week we looked at Jesus' last instructions to his disciples before his death. This morning, we're going to take a look at part of his final conversation with God the Father before the cross.

John 17:11-23

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name -- the name you gave me -- so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Do you remember the old commercials for Tombstone pizza? A man is sitting in the courtyard of a prison, blindfolded. Some foreign legion looking guards have their guns ready to execute him. An officer walks up to him and asks, "What do you want on your tombstone?" And the man replies, "I'll have sausage, pepperoni and mushrooms."

The commercials poked fun at the old movie classic of asking people who were about to die what their last request would be. The man was giving a bizarre answer, because he understood the question differently than the person asking.

A relatively funny commercial, but a pretty heavy topic. If you knew you were about to die, what would your last request be? What would you wish you could leave as a legacy when you are gone?

It's in that context that we need to consider this prayer of Jesus. He knows he's going to die. He knows that isn't the end of it for himself, but he knows that he will be leaving his

earthly life and the disciples. Things are not going to return to the same. The phase of his physical presence was coming to an end. So Jesus prays to his Father about the situation and those he is leaving behind.

And to my way of thinking, his prayer takes a somewhat unexpected turn. He asks for the disciples to have unity. Of all the things he could request, that was his choice. And it wasn't just for his disciples – it was for us, too, because he said it was also for those who would believe in him later.

Why did that matter so much to Jesus, and what did he mean by it? What is unity and how do we know if we're experiencing it? Those are some of the questions I'd like to explore with you this morning.

The idea of unity can bring up a lot of misconceptions in our minds.

It might sound like a bunch of nuns on a peace march. Kind of a harmless word that doesn't have much impact.

It might sound like we're trying to make a bunch of clones that all look and act exactly the same.

Or we might think that it means doing a whole lot of pretending we're happy so we can get along with everybody.

But Jesus talks about it differently. The word he uses is literally the number one. When you put it in the framework of math and numbers, you can think of whole numbers (or integers) and fractions. We are not whole unless we are together. We don't form the number one when we are apart – we're only fractions by ourselves. It takes unity to form the number one.

Rom 12:4-5

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

That's a much more dynamic way to think of unity. Look at a guitar. It has a neck, strings, tuning keys, a body, frets. You need all the different parts. When one string is out of tune, you notice it. But a pack of strings doesn't make a guitar – you need the other parts too. When all of them are combined in the proper way and adjusted, they function as a unit. And unit is where the word unity comes from.

Unity is not unison, where everyone is the same. It allows for there to be differences, in fact it needs the differences in order to function properly. It's just all the parts working together the way they were designed.

There's an old saying that a good fiction writer never introduces a gun into the story unless somebody is going to use it. Why? Because no element is just randomly placed in a story. It has to have a purpose for being there.

Jesus doesn't just randomly pick unity as his theme. There's a point to it. And if we're going to talk seriously about unity, one of the first issues to look at is

The reason for unity

Why did it matter to Jesus that his disciples would be "as one?"

He states it in his prayer. The unity of the disciples testifies to the fact that Jesus is from God. Our being connected to each other somehow is the thing that validates Christ's message to the world.

Think about that for a minute. Our relationships with each other are the primary means that Jesus said would be used to show the world we are his. How I act towards you and how you act towards me sends out a signal for everybody to see.

Erwin McManus has commented that he wishes Jesus had said the world would know us by our faith, rather than our love. Or maybe they could know Jesus is real by our clear logic.

But that isn't what Jesus said. Instead, he made our interactions and connections with other Christians the litmus test for the truth.

Jodie Berndt tells the story of a high school teacher named Mary Ellen, who had grown up with a terrible religious experience that made her absolutely hostile toward any of her students who she thought were even remotely Christian. Kids would go home crying because she would ridicule their faith so much.

The time came when Mary Ellen had to have hip surgery. The school secretary called this group of moms who prayed for their kids in school every week, and she asked them to pray for Mary Ellen. Well, at least some of the women had kids who had suffered under this woman, and they really didn't care what happened to her, but they agreed to pray.

As they did, they felt convicted that they needed to do more than pray. So while Mary Ellen was recuperating from surgery, they brought her meals, helped care for her and sat with her. Eventually one woman was able to share the message of God's love with her and she committed her life to Christ.

When Mary Ellen returned to school, even the other teachers noticed a difference. One remarked to her, "Watch out for those moms in that prayer group. They're in some kind of a cult."

Mary Ellen replied, “You may think that, but they are the first people I’ve ever met who really loved me.”

If we as New Day church say that our vision is to build a worshipping community of all kinds of people that is a living testimony to the power of the gospel and the reality of God’s kingdom, that means we exist to bear witness to the truth of Christ. According to Christ, if we want to bear witness to him, it will be through demonstrating unity.

Ephesians 4:3

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Unity is more than just a nice byproduct. It deserves our energy and attention and best efforts, because it was a priority to Christ. And the reason it was a priority was because it is a powerful tool for reaching the world around us.

It seems, though, that any time something deserves our attention, there’s something to keep us from it. Let’s look at

The resistance to unity

This prayer had no sooner left Jesus’ lips than it seemed the unity of his disciples began to crumble. Judas turned him in, Peter denied knowing him, and the rest scattered. After his resurrection and return to heaven, infighting began between different groups of Christian Jews who didn’t think they were getting fair treatment. And that was before the church went international, when it should have been at its most unified.

The rest of the New Testament is filled with instructions for churches that are struggling to keep unity, and the track record has continued all through history. It would appear that in general, Christians have failed to live up to Jesus’ prayer.

Even in his prayer, Jesus alludes to the three sources of resistance that plague the church the most. He said,

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

That means there are **spiritual forces** working against us being able to stick together. The devil knows what matters to Christ, and he’s going to do everything in his power to mess things up. If unity displays Jesus to the world, then unity will be a natural target for spiritual attack.

What does that look like? Sometimes it will come in the form of confusion and misunderstanding. You say one thing and I hear something else, and the next thing you know, we’re divided. Or maybe it comes in the general vibe or feeling you get when you walk into a group. Sometimes the tension is so thick you can cut it with a knife. It may

be hard to put your finger on the exact cause, but it is a spiritual dimension that is very real.

Secondly, **external forces** work against the church:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.

That sounds like a bit of exaggeration until you run into some people. There are individuals out there who literally hate the church – like Mary Ellen did. All you have to do is listen in on some talk radio and you will hear people just spew hatred toward the church.

It's a hostile world out there and there are going to be those who take great pleasure in watching the church fall flat. Our disunity is a great excuse for people who don't want to accept what Christ has to say. One of the main reasons people say they don't come to church is that it's just full of hypocrites. When the world you're trying to reach is dead set against you, you're in for a battle.

Finally, there are **internal forces** in the church that erode unity:

While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

Already as Jesus was praying, there was dissension in the ranks. One was lost – Judas. We mentioned this last week, but there is plenty of potential for trouble in any group of Christ's followers. We don't need to look outside for opposition to unity.

It doesn't even have to be sin or someone being intentionally wrong. It can happen because of differences in personalities or preferences. It can happen through misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

Unity takes work. So how do we go about it?

The road to unity

Jesus prayed, "*May they be brought to complete unity.*" That suggests to me that this is a process, not an instant fix. Someday we will be completely unified, but in the meantime, it's a long road to travel.

Did you take long road trips as a kid? When we did, and I would get bored in the car, I would start watching the mile markers to track our progress. Were we getting closer?

As we move down the road toward unity, how can we know if we're making progress? There are some mile markers to help us along the way.

Marker #1: Recognizing I'm not all that.

I would venture to guess that most issues of unity could be resolved on the spot if one or both people in the disagreement could gain some healthy perspective on their own condition.

Rom 12:3

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.

Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

If I am conscious of my own faults and shortcomings, then chances are I will be a little more understanding of those in other people.

Marker #2: Recognize Christ in other people.

We've talked about how as a church we are carrying Christ to the world. That's got a nice feel to it. We like being the ones who have that important message to bring. It gives us a sense of purpose and dignity.

But sometimes we forget that Christ is in our brothers and sisters. If we really believe that when someone accepts Jesus he places his Holy Spirit in their hearts, then that means we should be looking at each other differently and listening more carefully to what each other has to say.

Last weekend, at the funeral for Karin's grandpa, her dad got up and told a story. A well-known evangelist came to town in rural Saskatchewan, and that was big news. Only trouble was, he was coming to a Lutheran church. In those days, if you went to a Baptist church, you were extremely suspicious of Lutherans, and vice versa. Each group had its corner on the truth. Still, Karin's grandpa took his son and went to hear the preacher.

To add to the scandal, at the end of the service, Karin's grandpa got up and went forward for prayer. Her dad was shocked and angry. In the car on the way home, he asked, "Daddy, why did you go forward in that church?"

Karin's grandpa replied, "I needed to get my heart right with Jesus." That was a pivotal moment for Karin's dad, to realize that Christ's church is bigger than one little corner of the world, bigger than the barriers we put up between ourselves and others, and that he can and will speak to us through people we think are unlikely messengers.

We need to recognize Christ in those around us, because when we pay attention to them in that way, we will be far less likely to dismiss their opinions or treat them with anything

less than the highest respect. Then when there are disagreements, we will work through them more carefully and prayerfully to reach an answer that doesn't divide us.

Marker #3: Recognize the crowbars

Having said that, there will still be people out there who are crowbar personalities. They are out to pry people apart and drive a wedge.

Rom 16:17-18

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.

Fresh wind, Fresh Fire story

He's absolutely right. I have seen churches being torn apart by gossip and backbiting. It's ugly. We are early enough on in our ministry here at New Day that we have not yet bumped up against these issues. But they will come, and when they do, our response must be the same. When confrontation needs to happen, it should be done openly and clearly so that there's no room for it to become a crowbar.

All these are important markers on the road to unity. But one thing is probably even more important to recognize, and that is

The reality of unity

Jesus pointed out that he was one with God the Father. That is a reality that is firm and solid. And that is the basis for our reality. We will be one, because we are the body of Christ, and to reflect that, we have to be true to the character of the relationship within the Trinity. Unity may not look like it exists in the church, but the underlying reality of unity is undeniable. We are invited to share in the experience that already exists between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And that is what gives us hope of someday seeing true unity lived out in our humanity as well.

It is worth noting that Jesus' plea for unity was to God – not to his disciples. It was a prayer – not a command. He realized that the source of unity is God. We too will need to get on our knees and pray for unity.

One time at another church, a church leader came to me after a sermon by the pastor, and this leader was fuming mad. He was ready to call for the pastor's resignation and do all kinds of things.

Now, you have to know that I am about the worst counselor in the world. I'm not the right person to come to for advice most of the time, because I can never think of what to say. In this case, I was getting more and more uncomfortable and feeling at a loss. Finally I said, "You know what? Let's pray about this right now."

We did. And almost instantly, the Holy Spirit changed the mood of the room. This other person relaxed. The situation seemed less desperate. Prayer was key to helping restore a level of unity.

Our unity is rooted in the character of God, and it is based firmly in the work of Christ on the cross. That is what unites us, because we all need it.

As we turn to celebrate the Lord's Supper, or "communion", that word itself speaks of the unity and fellowship we have. We are all united by the cross and our need for grace. It's at this table of mercy where we are most aware of how much we have in common. It's when we're looking at the cross that divisions fade away.

Christ said he sanctified himself – he dedicated himself – to be given on our behalf that we could be one. He was torn apart so we could be brought together.

While you prepare your heart to take the bread and dip it in the juice, ask yourself:

Am I united with Christ?

Am I aware of my own crowbars?

Do I hear and see Christ in other Christians?

Am I actively pursuing unity?

1 Cor 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.