



Prayer of Unity

John 17:20-26

TRINITY PULPIT

Christiana Cleveland, professor at Duke, writes in her book, *Disunity in Christ*, that Jesus creates a new family. It is the first family. It is a new first family and it is a family of the followers of Jesus. This family of followers demands our highest allegiance. In fact, it demands even allegiance over our other families – even our biological families.

Dr. Cleveland's book is a look at why we find such disunity in the body of Christ, and it takes a social and psychological look at why we tend to choose sides and create our own social tribes. She explores why, in culture, we find it advantageous to belong to a certain group or identity, and yet, to allow this cultural idolatry to occur in the church is to miss the whole point of being the church.

You may remember that Dr. Cleveland begins this book by telling a very personal story about a man named Ben. She writes that she was thinking about Ben — a young man in her church — as she was on a bus in the Rocky Mountains. Ben and her were the only unmarried adults in the small congregation she attended. She said she thought of Ben as the most offensive person she had ever known. He was bossy and preachy. As Dr. Cleveland reflected on all she disliked about Ben, she had this random thought come into her mind. It must have been the work of the Spirit. She thought to herself, *Ben is going to be in heaven. With me. For all eternity. And I will never be rid of him.* Suddenly, the idea of frolicking around the streets of gold seemed less enticing. *That is okay,* she thought, *Heaven is going to be a big, big place.*

Dr. Cleveland goes on to share that we have made a mistake. We have divided ourselves into groups that she calls right and wrong Christians. The wrong Chris-

tians are, of course, all those people who do not interpret scripture like you, stress the doctrines of faith that you do, and of course just have a general outlook on life like you. The only problem is that in the body of Christ, there is really no such thing as right and wrong Christians.

Dr. Cleveland writes about reflecting on Ben the next summer. When there were wildfires in Santa Barbara and many members had their homes threatened, it was Ben who could be found going from house to house and checking on members. The one that she thought was all wrong was actually all right. More importantly, he was her brother in Christ. This was her family of faith.

Why do we find such disunity in the body of Christ? Well, there are several reasons. There is, of course, practice and doctrine. The church has had its differences from the beginning. Whether it was circumcision, or whether to eat meat offered to idols, or the nature of Jesus, or the Trinity — and the list goes on — the church has always known differences in doctrine. The church is also sometimes divided by the culture in which it is located. Politics, national identity, and tribal identity can influence the church, to where the church in North America can look much different than the church in South America, China, Europe, or Africa. In fact, church can look different in rural North Carolina than it does in the Triangle. Cultural norms causes the church to be in disunity.

In John 17 we find a recorded prayer of Jesus. Jesus begins by praying to the Father and he prays for himself. He prays that God will glorify him and that God's plan will be fulfilled in his life. Then Jesus prays for his disciples. Those who are sharing life with Jesus, Jesus prays they will remember and accept all that he has taught them. In other

words, he prays that his years of ministry will not be for nothing. He prays that the twelve will continue his ministry once he is gone. He prays the Father will protect them and preserve them so the message will be preserved.

Then Jesus turns his attention to all believers, to the church and all who will choose to follow him for all time. Jesus is praying to the Father for us and for the church through the centuries. What should he pray for? Should he pray they would be a powerful source with all knowledge and full understanding of doctrine? Should he pray that they would be able to articulate their faith in such a way that their language and abilities would be an overwhelming witness to Jesus? All of this would be great, but when Jesus begins to think about you and me and those who would become his church, Jesus begins with this:

I pray also for those who will believe in me through the message of the disciples that all of them may become one.

Jesus' prayer above all things when thinking about the church is that first and foremost they would be one. Jesus prays that we might be one as he and the Father are one. Listen to this language:

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 as you have loved me.

When Jesus prays for us, he prays first and foremost that we might be one. This is why, my friends, the unity of the church may well be the most important characteristic of the church. Above all the right doctrine, the right methods, the right programs, and the right proclamations, they may all come to nothing if the church is not one in Christ. If unity is not a part of our character, then I wonder how much of all the other good things we might do really will amount to anything in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus prays that we are one.

Why does Jesus pray this prayer? Jesus tells us. First that we might reflect the nature of the relationship between God the Father, Son, and Spirit. We are to be one because God is one. The Trinity might be the most mysterious and most difficult concept to teach theologically. All of our metaphors and analogies fall short at some point. Yet, the Bible reveals that the One God is also a God in community. Our God, the God who is above all gods, the One who

created all things chooses to be revealed as a God who is One in three and three in One.

The Trinity is complete in every way, but the one who holds the Trinity together is Jesus. Everything ultimately is created by Jesus and for Jesus. The final picture of the Bible is everyone worshipping Jesus. So, why is Jesus at the center? Let's think of it logically. Because of Jesus we know that God is Father. If there is no Jesus we don't really understand fully God as Father. We might know God as creator and powerful but not as Father. It is Jesus who shows us that God is One and yet three, and in this revelation, God is revealed as a good, good Father. A Father, who is loving, filled with grace and forgiveness. Because Jesus relates to God as Father, we know that Jesus and God are one and acting as one, and this relationship reveals God as loving and full of grace.

Jesus teaches us that God is friend. Jesus comes and becomes just like you and me. Jesus is a human in every way. To deny Jesus' full humanity is to deny Jesus. Jesus is fully God but also fully human — what we refer to as incarnation. Jesus comes and is like us in every way, yet, without sin, to reveal to us the person of God. Jesus is friend. Jesus is advocate. Jesus is our example. Jesus revealed as part of the Trinity reminds us God is friend.

Jesus promises us the Spirit. Jesus, by reminding us that the Holy Spirit will come after he ascends, reminds us of the third part of the Trinity. This person, the Holy Spirit, is power, comfort, and our peace. In fact, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Comforter. The Holy Spirit reminds us of the ever-abiding presence of God. That through God there is transformation.

So, God who is One lives in community as Trinity. This community is a great reminder of the God who is Father, the God who is friend, the God who is present. Jesus says, just like the community of the Trinity is one, let the church be one. Let our Oneness point to something more than just self.

Jesus prays that we might be one just as the Trinity is one, because that oneness reveals the very nature of God. When we live as one we begin to model what it might mean for God to be one and yet live in community.

Jesus says for us to be one is to remind the world of God's love and the good news of the gospel. Jesus puts it very simply. We are to be one, so that we can share the message that God sent Jesus and that God loves the world.

The unity of the church points to the gospel of Jesus. Interview after interview with those who are not followers of Jesus, point to one of the main reasons they do not follow Jesus is the division and fighting among believers. When they look at believers, what they see are people who are argumentative and those who seem to not speak of the preeminence of Jesus.

It is true there is a tendency in the church to make the small matters essential and that which is essential, small. Jesus says we should pray for unity, because when we are unified the gospel can be heard. Why is this the case? Simply put, the only thing that can unify us is the gospel.

To find unity in a diverse world we must find something bigger than self. If self is the end all, then unity is impossible. If self and self-interest is most important, then all others see is self. There must be something greater.

I think about our founding fathers and mothers who sacrificed much for our nation. They believed in something more than self. The Constitution begins with "We the People." The Declaration of Independence says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Over and over again, Americans have decided that being American – being we – is more important than being me.

Business people know this to be true.

In a recent interview with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, he spoke about the need to live life with a purpose. That life had to be more than about self. Now we might say that is easy for a billionaire, but studies show the following for those who live with a purpose beyond self:

People who live with a great purpose live 7 years longer than their peers. Are more likely to be engaged at work. Are more likely to achieve within an organization.

In other words, even the world and social science says that having something more important than self is good for you.

Here is what is important: we were created to be about something more than self. That is why when we hear moving speeches to sacrifice for the good

of the whole, or we hear stories about people who make a great sacrifice for another, we are moved. There is something in us that knows that is right. There is something more important than self.

Jesus says we should be one because when we are one, then the world sees the gospel. The gospel, that God loves all people and sent Jesus to the world, is the most important message. When we choose disunity over unity we hide this good news and the world suffers. We must be one so the gospel can be heard.

Jesus prays that we might be one so that we might reflect who God is and that we might share the good news of the gospel.

Unity is also the command of Scripture. The New Testament teaches us to be unified in Spirit. My friends, if unity is this important to Jesus, should it not also be this important to us?

A church member once said to me, "Jeff, I think all you care about is everyone getting along with each other. You just want everyone to like each other and get along." Well, yes, I think I do. Yet, I have thought about his statement. What he was really saying was you don't have any convictions. Yes, I do want people to like each other, but even saying that, I know I am short-selling the gospel. Jesus did not say, "I want you to like each other." Jesus did not say, "Others would know you belong to me if you like each other." Jesus demands much more. Jesus says, "If you want to be known as followers of mine, you must love each other."

So, I have thought about the words of this person for many years. Here is what I think about it: I think I am right in saying that our greatest conviction, beyond the conviction that Jesus is Lord, may well need to be we are one in the bond of love. The unity of the church seemed paramount in the mind of Jesus; the words of Jesus, the actions of Jesus, the teaching of the Apostle Paul, and the other writers of the New Testament. Over and over again we are charged to be unified.

So, what do we see in Jesus? We see that Unity is the prayer of Jesus. Unity is the example of God in the Trinity. Unity is the command of Scripture. The Apostle Paul wrote:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,

then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

It is as though Paul says, if Jesus means anything to you, be like-minded; have the same love; be like in One, in Spirit, and in Mind.

The Message reads:

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends.

Unity of the body of Christ is the prayer of Jesus, the example of Jesus, the command of Scripture and of Jesus. Finally, it is the work of Jesus. What do I mean? I mean that when the gospel does its work, the end result is unity. Paul says, "In Christ, there is no male or female, slave or free, Greek or Jew, all are one in Christ Jesus." The things that divide us fade because Jesus is preeminent. When we get to the end of scripture, we find the great multitude of saints before the throne of God and John describes it this way:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."

Unity of the body of Christ is the end result of the gospel. That is what we are moving to. Every nation, political divisions. Every tribe, choice of affiliation. Every people. Every ethnic group. Every language. Yes, those who do not speak English and you can't understand or cannot understand you. They are all there before the throne of God and they all cry, "Salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb." Do you know why salvation belongs to God? Because only God can make the many one. If it were left to us we would leave others out but not God. For God so loved the whole world. The end result of the gospel is the unity of believers in Christ singing the same song of praise.

Then it dawned on her, *Oh no, Ben is going to be in heaven for all eternity, with me. Why wait until then; why not pray for unity?*

Unity: it is the work of the gospel, it is the example of God, it is the testimony of Scripture, and it is the prayer of Jesus. ▲



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