

### Jesus Prays for Us

John 17:20-26 *"I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word."*

In John's gospel Jesus offers a prayer for his disciples the night before his death. He prays that God will protect them as they continue in the life to which he has called them. In the portion for today, Jesus prays for us. We are those who have come to believe in him through the message that was spoken by the first disciples. Jesus prays that we remain in unity with one another, with him, and with God.

What is this oneness? Is it agreement about ideas? Is it an absence of conflict or misunderstanding? Is it conformity of religious ideas or spiritual practice? None of that is what Jesus is talking about. It is something deeper. It is our belonging to each other and to God through Jesus. It is a oneness that holds us together in the love that comes from God who IS love. It is a oneness that allows for and is even the wellspring of creativity and diversity. In this oneness we can be the diverse and unique persons we are created to be and yet be together in a way that does not let difference and diversity turn into division and a divisive spirit.

When we come into the community of faith it does not take very long to realize that we are very different people. We have personal histories that have gifted and wounded us in certain ways. We have habits of thinking and acting that eventually bang up against each other. We have fears and insecurities and all sorts of baggage that make us sometimes difficult to live with. We also have abilities and gifts that need to be disclosed and used. We have a longing to discover and live out of what we are called to do with our lives. All of this makes for a real community of real people who have all felt the call to be together because of Jesus Christ and the message of his life, death and resurrection. Being a community in Christ is the greatest blessing in our lives, but it is also a great challenge. Is it any wonder that Jesus especially prays for our remaining in this oneness?

Not only are there challenges to our being in community together, there are the challenges of being a faith community in a world that often fills us with fear, discouragement, anger, and hurt. Yet it is that very world that we are called to love and serve. That's what John's community was facing in the last decade or so of the first century, in particular the oppressive and brutal Roman regime. When Jesus talks about "the world," he means the world that has gone awry, that is living opposite to the ways God created us to live—peacefully, generously, compassionately, justly. It is our oneness in God through Christ that provides the

refuge we need, but also empowers and strengthens us to live in redemptive ways in the world.

It is important to understand what it means to "believe in" Jesus. When Jesus talks about our believing in him, he means something different from how we usually use the word "belief." We think of belief as holding to an idea. That's the way the church, or religion in general, has usually presented religious faith—as a matter of holding to certain religious ideas. This becomes a problem for us when we find ourselves beginning to question certain religious ideas. When religion is reduced to the holding of beliefs, then those who ask questions are made to feel unfaithful or worse, heretics.

Biblically the words "believe" or "faith" have a very different, richer meaning. To believe in Jesus Christ means not just that we find something true in his life and message but that we give ourselves to a way of life. We give ourselves to him as the way, the truth and the life. Our lives take on a new center as we begin the journey of living as those who listen to Jesus, who try out this way of life for ourselves. When Jesus prays for all of those who will believe in him through the first disciples' words, he is praying for each and all of us as we make this journey of faith, living as his followers and his community.

Jesus prays that we will continue to touch that deep unity we have with God and each other through Jesus himself. To believe in Jesus in the way I just described is to become aware of that deep interconnection of life. Jesus says that this communion is already ours because we have entered into the life of faith. He prays, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us." Jesus' relationship with God is so full, so complete, that he speaks of his interdwelling with God, and prays that we may continue to inter dwell with God and himself, to share in this common life. All of this "I in you and you in me, and them in us" language is not meant to be intellectually analyzed. It is meant to open up our awareness of the interconnection of our lives with each other and with God as we endeavor in the life to which Jesus calls us.

How do we stay in touch with this deep union we have with each other and with God in and through Jesus the living Christ? How do we do our part to respond to Jesus' prayer that we all be one? I think it is very practical.

First, we share our lives with one another. There is nothing more isolating than not being known by another person. There is nothing that breeds alienation and misjudging of others more than not knowing the humanity of others, their stories, their struggles, their fears, their dreams and hopes. We have a practice or discipline here that we encourage each other to work with. We call it "accountability." At one level, accountability means that we need others to hold us accountable for the commitment we have made to our own spiritual life. It is easy to let ourselves off the hook, giving up on the very practices of prayer and so forth

that can help us grow spiritually. Accountability is the way we are encouraged to share on a regular basis with our mission group or another person how we are doing with our spiritual lives, where we are struggling, where we are experiencing growth.

On another level, accountability simply has to do with sharing our lives with others, letting others know what is going on with us, where we are struggling or hurting or sensing a particular direction for our lives. When we share with one another in this way, we experience the oneness Jesus is talking about. We still have our own challenges and struggles, which no one can take away from us, but we know that our lives are part of a community that accepts us and encourages us to keep with it, to be faithful to ourselves and our lives. Accountability is one way we continue to touch the oneness we have in God through Christ.

Second, we need to practice deep listening to each other. We must grow in our ability to listen without judgment, without thinking of how we are going to respond, and even without thinking of how we can help or solve this person's problem. We simply listen, offering each other the free and open space to speak from our hearts. When we do this, we are practicing the oneness we have in Christ, trusting that our fundamental belonging to each other in God will provide what is needed. We stop trying to fix each other, assuming we know is best for the other person. When we try to fix other people, even out of the best of intentions, we are robbing them of their own inner strengths, their own primary belonging to God and not to us.

Third, personal and community times of prayer and worship are very important in cultivating our awareness of our oneness with each other and with God in Christ. One of the most important aspects of personal and community worship is silence. Our practicing of silence together is crucial. In silence, we stop and calm our minds and hearts. We let go of the incessant thinking that keeps us stirred up and uproots us from really being present to ourselves, one another and God. In silence, we are able to open up to the reality of our own lives and other people, to simply be with ourselves and others in a non-possessive, non-demanding way.

Silence is difficult for us. We want to run from it, fill it up with sound, with distractions. But what we discover if we stay with it long enough is the profound joy and peace that comes when we, through silence, enter into the reality of the present moment and of life itself, without the distractions, without the grid of our thinking through which we see life in distorted and limited ways. This is why we offer each Sunday morning a time of silent gathering here in our chapel. It is preparation for worship together, for being more keenly aware of God's presence and of each other and our own lives. In silence, we become ready to listen inwardly

for what God is saying to us, to the "word" that Jesus is talking about, the word through which we have come to believe.

If we can practice this kind of sharing, listening, and silence, our awareness of the deep oneness we have with one another and with God in Jesus will grow. Jesus calls us together to be a different kind of community, a community in which others will see and experience God and God's love. Jesus prays that we will become more completely one, that we will continue to grow in our own understanding and the reality of our oneness. We aren't "there" yet; there is always room for growth. But God is in us leading us toward that fulfillment of our oneness. I think that the important thing is for us to appreciate the community we have, not to keep looking for that illusive perfect community our imaginations tell us must be out there somewhere. I read recently a very wise spiritual teacher talking about just this. We don't need a perfect community, even if one existed. The one we have is good enough. It is up to us to do our best to live together in a way that helps us touch and grow in the oneness we have in Christ, the oneness Jesus prays for us. In the view of Jesus in John's gospel, this is the most important gift we have to offer to the world.