

Unity In Christ

John 17:20-26

January 5, 2025

Imagine being able to see straight into another person's soul. They say the eyes are the window of the soul, and while you can often tell by the eyes if a soul is at peace or not, the eyes don't really tell you what all's going on inside. What are their deepest fears? What are their greatest joys? What are their strongest desires? There is a way to know that and in today's passage, we are privileged, if only for a brief moment, to look into the very heart and soul of our Savior. Please open your Bibles this morning to John 17.

Before we read the passage today, it's helpful to know a bit of the setting. Jesus has just finished the Last Supper with His Disciples in the Upper Room and in an hour or two He will be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and hauled off to His series of illegal trials, beatings, and cruel crucifixion the next morning. He has shared not only dinner with His disciples but also His last teachings encouraging them and us to keep His commandments, to bear much fruit, and to not let their hearts be troubled. He has just promised them the gift of His Holy Spirit and has tried to prepare them as best He can for the tumultuous events of the coming hours and days.

And after He finishes teaching them, He prays the prayer we find in John 17. Some call it Jesus' High Priestly prayer for He goes to the Father on behalf of all of His followers including you and me. It is the longest of Jesus' recorded prayers and He prays for our protection from the Evil One, for our holiness or sanctification, and for our joy. And He prays for something else. To find out what, please stand as we read from John 17:20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 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. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 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. 24 Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. 25 Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. 26 I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

What a privilege John gives us here to eavesdrop on Jesus' conversation with His Father. Through John 17, we can hear and see Jesus' heart and His deepest longings. We can hear His love for you and me and for His church. I have taken portions of His prayer and incorporated them into my daily prayers for me, my family, for you and for our church and I would encourage you to do the same. Read and reread His prayer to gain

insight into His heart. If you really want to know someone, listen to them pray. I fell in love with Nancy when we prayed together as I heard her pleading with the Father for her family, for her church, and for God's will to be done. We can fall more deeply in love with Jesus as we hear His prayer for us.

Initially it seems Jesus might only be praying for His original disciples but verse 20 erases that whole idea as He makes it clear He is not only praying for them, but for all of those who **will believe** in Him through their message. If you're a Christian, say, "That's me!" Jesus is praying here for you! The night before He went to the cross, **you** were on His mind! And on His heart. He took the time to pray for you that night. And in addition to praying for your holiness and for your joy and for your protection, He prays for something else. Say Unity.

Two men are standing on a bridge, one is about to jump off and the other is trying to talk him out of it. The man asks the jumper, "So are you a Christian or a Hindu or a Jew or what?"

The jumper replies, "A Christian."

The man says, "Small world, me too! Protestant, or Catholic, or Orthodox?"

The jumper answers, "Protestant."

The man replies, "Me too! What denomination?"

The jumper says, "Baptist"

The man replies, "Me too! Southern Baptist or Northern Baptist?"

The jumper answers, "Northern Baptist."

The man replies, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist."

The man replies, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern region?"

The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region."

The man replies, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region council of 1912?"

The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region council of 1912." The man then pushes the jumper off the bridge and screams, "Die you Heretic!"

It seems at times that Jesus' followers have been everything but united.

Verse 23 is our theme verse for 2025 at Antioch and if you haven't already memorized it, please do. It's short and easy. May they be brought to complete unity. Not partial, not limited, not halfway, complete! Completely unified. We're going to talk a bit about what that means today and the next few Sundays but I'd also encourage you to take some time to meditate daily on what that means.

I praise God that we are unified at Antioch. That we are not deeply divided in belief or practice and that as far as I know there are no wide canyons between us. We have our differences from time to time, we have our rifts here and there, that God willing,

we'll work on, but we haven't chosen this theme because we're widely separated. We've chosen it because we can be closer yet and because this is Jesus' prayer for His church. Jesus knows what is best for us and Jesus wants what is best for us, and if He prayed for our complete unity, that's His best for us.

In verse 21, He prays that we may be one. Say one. But He doesn't stop there. As Jesus often does, He provides a yardstick to measure what He's talking about. How much are we to be one? **Just** as He and the Father are one. Just as He is in the Father and as the Father is in Him. He wants our relationships with each other to reflect His own relationship with His Father. Earlier in the evening, Jesus told His disciples they were in Him and that through His Spirit He would be in them. But that's not what He's talking about here. It's not about our vertical relationship with Jesus. This is about our horizontal relationship with our brothers and sisters. With others who serve and follow and believe in Jesus.

Years ago Tom T. Hall wrote and sung Me and Jesus Got Our Own Thing Going. And while everyone does need their own personal relationship with Jesus, if you really know, love, and serve Jesus, you will realize pretty quickly that His will, His heart is **never** for just you and Him to have your own thing going. His heart and His will is to have unity together with others who believe in Him also. We hear that so clearly here in Jesus' prayer. It's harder that way, but it's His best for us and we want to seek His best in 2025!

That we may be one so much that we are just like God the Father and Christ the Son. Try to talk about one of those without mentioning the other. Try thinking about one without the other. They are inseparably joined and that is Jesus' prayer for us. That we will be so closely joined to each other that we can't think of one member of Antioch without thinking of the other members. And while Antioch is much more unified than many congregations, we're not yet one as is the Father and Son. Do you want to be? I pray that we do. As does Jesus.

In our theme verse, verse 23, Jesus gives a primary motivation for His prayer for our unity: "That the world may know that God the Father sent Jesus." The closer we get to each other in the Body of Christ, the more powerful our witness in this world will be. This ties in directly with our theme for last year, the Great Commission. Which is still as strong now as it was then, but our unity is actually an evangelism strategy. One of my on-going prayers, you've heard in the pastoral prayer many times, is for God to send revival in this valley. And in this nation. The more unified we are in Jesus in the church, the greater will be our witness for Him outside the church.

I don't think I have to tell you today we live in a very divided world. We are divided over politics and over morality. We're divided over money and over health care. We're divided over just about everything you can be divided over. And the devil is

celebrating. He sows seeds of division and he waters them and they grow if we give them oxygen. He does it in families and marriages. We must be diligent to suffocate his weeds and seeds, to pull them out every time we see them. But if a divided world can see a unified church, they'll be drawn to her! When a nonbeliever comes into this church, they see hundreds of Christians singing praises to God. Human beings of different skin colors, different economic backgrounds, different ages, all united in Jesus, praising the same God together. That has an impact on them because with one heart and one voice, we are glorifying God together unlike the divided world around them.

Other Sundays we're going to talk about being unified in our beliefs and unified in our practices and so on, but today, we must understand our need to be unified in Jesus! We're not a social group or a country club. We're not a community organization to do community service although we do good deeds in Jesus' name. We are not an organization, but a living breathing organism, called the church, the Bride of Christ, united in our belief and in our commitment to Him.

Being united in Christ means that we believe He is God's Son, our Savior. That He is the Immanuel. That He is our Alpha and Omega. That He is the only hope for a lost and dying world. It means we recognize Him as our Lord, our Master who calls our shots and directs our work. Who alone is on the throne of our individual hearts and of our group heart known as His church. If we are united in Jesus, we will then seek to find what Jesus taught about various things and then adopt His teachings as our beliefs. We'll seek to find out what His will is and make His will ours. We'll try to find out what He wants done and then do it. But only if we are united in Him. If we aren't then my opinion is just as good as yours and vice versa. We can decide everything by congregational vote and set Jesus' teachings aside, God forbid. We can do what we think is best. Oh God save us from ourselves! When we are united in Jesus, when we are one in Him and in each other, His will is done on earth even as it is in heaven.

Sometimes people say, "I wish I knew what God's will is. I wish I knew what God wants." While there may be some areas that are less clear than others, this is very clear! This is what Jesus wants! This is what He prayed for and continues to pray for! This is what He died and rose again for! That we may be one even as He and the Father are one! And as we seek to fulfill His will in those very clear areas, He'll clarify the other areas that we may have questions about.

Oh, you say, but I don't want to do that. That means I'd have to get along with so and so. I'd have to forgive him or her for what they did to me. I'd have to tolerate them. Why yes it does mean that. But let me tell you that if we don't want to be unified in Jesus, or don't at least want to want to be unified in Jesus, we might as well forget about whatever else He says. It's not your kingdom or my kingdom. It's not your church or my church. It's Jesus' church! And this is His will for His church! Plain and simple! Col 1:18 says that "[Jesus] is the head of the body, the church; he is the

beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in **everything** he might have the supremacy.” Jesus is our head, our Master, our Superior in every way, and this is His Church.

So how does unity happen? I’m glad you asked. Number one, we each have to accept Jesus as our Savior and make Him Lord and Master of our own individual lives. It has to start with that. There is no corporate salvation in the sense that you’re saved because you belong to this church or are a part of that group. You’ll only be saved if you have personally confessed and turned from your sins and asked God to save you through Jesus’ blood. That’s number one.

As human beings we are unified in our DNA. We are all descended from Adam and Eve and have so very much in common. And yet we can be and are so divided. For because we’re also descended from Adam, we are united in his sin. We are all guilty before God and carry that reality with us. Unless and until we accept Jesus and when we do, we are suddenly united no longer with the population at large, but with every other believer through the blood of Jesus. In that crimson stream that flows from Calvary’s cross. It creates a unity and a closeness that bridges nationalities, languages, skin colors, and denominations. It initiates us into the Brotherhood of those with, as Peter called, like precious faith. The precious fellowship of the redeemed. The communion of the saints. The church.

In Gal 3:26-28, Paul says, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” We’re all now wearing the same uniform. It’s not American or Russian or Korean. We are clothed with Christ. When we get saved, we become more closely united with our Christian siblings in the church than with our own blood siblings in our birth families if they are not believers.

And then as we are born again in Him, as we begin to grow in Him, and learn to know Him better, we begin to grow closer to other members of His family as well. It’s like this. If you all individually get closer to me, you’ll draw closer to me, but as you do so, you’ll automatically draw closer to each other. As each sheep gets closer to the shepherd, they get closer to each other. As we get closer to Jesus, we will get closer to everyone else who is getting closer to Jesus. You can’t help it. It’s not only true physically but also true spiritually. As you and I both get closer to Jesus, we’ll get closer to each other and closer to our brothers and sisters in WV who are getting closer to Him and those in Tanzania and everywhere else. Eph 3:6 tells us we are members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

And so when we see each other whether it’s here or at Walmart, may our first thought be, “They are a fellow believer! I have the most important thing in common with

them!” Instead of, “Are they a democrat or a republican? Are they rich or poor?” Are they a Cowboy or Commanders fan? No! They are a fellow follower of Jesus. And that unites us closer and deeper and richer than anything else ever could including our relational bloodlines.

Rom 15:7 says, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” This life is not about you. It’s not about me. It’s about bringing praise to God! We accept each other not just for their benefit or for ours, but to glorify God! Which was one of our themes a few years back, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for what? The glory of God!

So we do draw closer to Jesus. But we also have to work on this intentionally with our Brothers and Sisters. The more time we spend with someone, the closer we become. We’ll be talking about some ways to do that more in the coming weeks but whenever we worship together, pray together, study together like in Sunday School or Bible Study, when we weep together and rejoice together, when we eat together, like today, or just visit together, the closer we’re going to grow and the deeper our unity will become.

We’ll say more about that another Sunday, but today, let’s understand that our unity must begin and be grounded in Jesus Christ who is our foundation, our Savior, our Master. If you’re here today and you’ve never accepted Jesus, you can’t obey His command to be unified with His body. That is the first step. And so if you never have, do that as we pray.