

SO THAT... THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

The last thing Jesus did, before going to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he was arrested before being crucified, was pray for his disciples. The whole of John 17 is Jesus' prayer. It's a prayer full of so much wonderfulness. It's worth reading in its entirety. I encourage you to do exactly that this week. And don't just read it once; read it every day. Read it in the same Bible translation or in different translations. Read it and listen for what leaps off the page at you. Make a note of it. Is it the same thing every day or is it something different? What is it that makes it leap off the page? Is it an encouragement you need? Is it something you need to be reminded of? What might it be that God needs you to hear this week?

This morning we're not reading the prayer in its entirety. Maybe one day I'll preach a series of sermons on just this chapter 17 of John, but this morning, we're focusing in on seven verses right at the end – verses 20 – 26. I'm going to read those verses from *The Message* this morning.

“I'm praying not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me. The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind – just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.

The same glory you gave me, I gave them, so they'll be unified and together as we are – I in them and you in me. Then they'll be mature in this oneness, and give the godless world evidence that you've sent me and loved them in the same way you've loved me.

Father, I want those you gave me to be with me, right where I am, so they can see my glory, the splendour you gave me, having loved me long before there ever was a world.

Righteous Father, the world has never known you, but I have known you, and these disciples know that you sent me on this mission. I have made your very being known to them – who you are and what you do – and continue to make it known, so that your love for me might be in them exactly as I am in them.”

One of my favourite things about Scripture is that a person can read a bunch of verses over and over again over the years, and always hear the same point – the same general meaning in the words. And then one day, suddenly, something different jumps off the page. It's like there's some new nuance or some new point that God needs you to hear. That's what happened to me as I was reading these verses this week.

Every single time I read John 17:20, this is what happens for me:

I read the words, hearing Jesus' voice: “I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word...”

And I am struck.

“Wow,” I think to myself, “How cool is that? Jesus was praying for me! for us!” Even though none of us were born, Jesus prayed for us! Jesus prayed for me! Jesus prayed for you! How cool is that?!”

This week, I heard a different emphasis. It's an emphasis that's especially clear in *The Message* version. This is how it reads (again, from the voice of Jesus):

"I'm praying not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me [this is still so cool to me, that Jesus is praying for us, but the thing that grabbed me this week is what comes next...] ...because of them and their witness about me."

Listen again:

"I'm praying not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me."

Other translations read: "...through their word" or "...through their message." It means the same thing. It's just less impactful in the other translations, than it is in *The Message*. At least, it's less impactful to my ears.

"I'm praying not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me *because of them and their witness about me.*"

Those words may as well have leapt of the page and smacked me in the head this week. That's how profoundly they impacted me this week.

Looking at this verse – verse 20 – in the context of the whole chapter, I hear the truth that we believe because those first disciples – and so many after them – carried on Jesus' mission in the world. I'm thankful for this. So very thankful. I have hope because of Jesus, because of what Jesus did, because Jesus' life and ministry were a tangible testament to the reality and the presence of God's kingdom, no matter how dark the world gets.

But something else about this verse was important for me to hear this week. This week, when I heard Jesus say, "I'm praying not only for them...", instead of hearing the 'them' refer to the disciples, I heard it referring to me – to us. Usually I read it this way: "I'm praying not only for these disciples, who are sitting at this table with me, who have spent the last three years with me.." This time I heard this: "I'm praying not only for them – for Elaine and the rest of the Walmer congregation..."

This is what the whole verse sounds like if we replace that first 'them': "I'm praying not only for the Walmer congregation, but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me."

I wonder if you'd be willing to try something this morning. I know most of us are included in 'the Walmer congregation', but I want us to really hear this. I want you to hear it like I heard it. I heard Jesus say, "I am praying not only for Elaine, but also for those who will believe in me because of Elaine and her witness about me." Now, if you're up for it, I wonder if you would you speak these words out loud, wherever you are right now, replacing the 'them' with your name? Jesus says, "I am praying not only for (insert your name), but also for those who will believe through (insert your name) because of (insert your pronoun) witness about me."

That's The Message version. But make the change in whatever translation you're using. The impact is the same.

How does the substitution make you feel, when it's your name, not the 'them'; when it's you, not the first disciples?

Having made that substitution, listen for how all the verses – verses 20 to 26 – sound. Because the 'them' is really a collective 'them', I'm going to substitute Walmer's people this time instead of individual names. But please hear your name as part of the 'them' – as one of Walmer's people. Two quick caveats before I read:

First, making this about Walmer makes this smaller than Jesus intended when he prayed it. He prayed this for all his disciples all over the world. But I think that by sticking with Walmer's people as the substitution for us this morning, we're more likely not to lose our individual selves in the collective 'them'.

The second caveat is this: from verse 20 on, the 'thems' include both the disciples and those who will believe through them. It's meant to include Walmer's people *and* those who will believe through Walmer's people. But again, to keep it simple and to make sure we don't lose our individual names in the reading, I'm going to continue substituting *Walmer's people*.

I'm going to read this through this twice. Listen the way you do in our Dwelling in the Word exercise we practice near the beginning of our Sunday services. What is it that God wants you to hear in these words this morning? I'll pause for bit between the readings.

“My prayer is not for Walmer's people alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through Walmer's message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you. May Walmer's people also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given Walmer's people the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

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.

Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and Walmer's people know that you have sent me. 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 Walmer's people and that I myself may be in Walmer's people.”

Pause for people to reflect.

Here it again, this time from the NRSV:

“I ask not only on behalf of Walmer’s people, but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may Walmer’s people also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me, I have given Walmer’s people, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that Walmer’s people, also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and Walmer’s people know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in Walmer’s people and I in them.”

Pause for people to reflect.

If we were all together in one place, I’d ask some of you to share what you heard in this reading. But I’m not convinced we can do that well in this set up today. But I really don’t want you to lose whatever it was that you heard. And sharing it – talking about it – with someone else helps make sure you don’t lose it. So maybe call someone later today or go out for lunch with someone. Or show up on Zoom Tuesday night at 7:30 to Continue the Conversation. But share – talk about – what it is that grabbed you from this reading this morning.

Here’s what struck me. It’s in verse 21 and again in verse 23. Listen to verse 21:

“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 sent me.”

and in verse 23:

“I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, *so that* the world may know that you have sent me [and then he expands on the prayer from verse 21] and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

There are two *so thats*.

“...*so that* the world may know [or believe] that you have sent me.”

“...*so that* the world may know that you have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Last week I talked about blessing. We read the familiar words that open Psalm 67:

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us.”

And then we saw that the ask doesn’t end there. We saw that the request for blessing is followed up with a *so that*.

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us *so that* your way may be known upon the earth, your saving power among all nations.”

I made the point that God's blessings aren't an end in and of themselves. The *so that* makes it clear that God's blessings are intended for the larger purpose of making God and God's ways known all across the world.

A similar thing is happening in our words today from John 17. There's an *ask* and then there's a *so that*. The *ask* in verse 21 is that we would be in the Father and in Jesus just like they are in each other. It's about unity with God. The *ask* in verse 23 is that in our unity with God, we would also have unity with each other.

But just like with the prayer for blessing, this prayer for unity – for oneness – isn't because that unity is some kind of an end in and of itself. There's a *so that*. The unity of Jesus' disciples with God and with each other has a purpose beyond the harmony of the Church. The unity of Walmer's people with God and with each other has a purpose beyond our church.

The purpose of our unity with God and with each other is *so that* all the people of the world would believe Jesus was sent by God *and so that* all the people of the world would know that God loves them with a self-sacrificing, unconditional, complete love. Doesn't our world desperately need to know that? – that they are deeply loved by God? If the people of our world knew they were loved, maybe kids wouldn't be shot in their classrooms, maybe armies wouldn't invade each other's homes, maybe warlords wouldn't arm children with automatic weapons, maybe corporations wouldn't oppress their workers.

I don't know... maybe everyone knowing they're loved by God won't solve all the world's problems. But surely it would at least make a dent in the world's problems.

And all it takes is us being united with God and with each other.

Hmmm. *All* it takes?

Unity might sound good, but is it really possible? Especially if we're talking about unity with God. Jesus prayed in verse 21, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us." The Father and the Son are perfectly intertwined and interdependent. They are two of the three-in-one. They are, at one and the same time, the same as and distinct from each other. Jesus is praying that we would be in them like they are in each other. Sounds great in theory. And maybe one day, when we get to heaven, we will experience that kind of unity with God. But in this life? It sounds more like wishful thinking than anything else.

As for unity with each other, maybe if we only surround ourselves with people who are just like us – who believe like we do, who have a similar worldview, who hold similar values – maybe unity with each other might be possible. But nowhere ever does Jesus suggest we should only be with people like ourselves. Jesus' own disciples were vastly different from each other. Right from the beginning of the first churches, God was pulling together people who were vastly different from each other. The New Testament is full of stories of division among the disciples and within the churches because of all these differences. But the solution wasn't to have specialty churches. The solution was something else entirely. Because unity among people who are different from each other, is what Jesus was praying for here in John 17.

I think, if unity is ours to achieve, we will fail. I think there's something inherent to our humanity that causes division. Not inherent to our humanity as we were originally created, but inherent to our humanity as fallen, sin-infected creatures. But unity – especially the kind of unity Jesus prays for in John 17 – is not ours to achieve. At least, it's not dependent on us trying really hard or being really good at getting along with other people.

The unity Jesus is praying for is likened to the unity of the Father with the Son. But what does that mean?

The relationship between God the Father and God the Son has been described as a “mutual indwelling of love.”ⁱ So when Jesus prays in verse 21, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...”, what he's praying is that we would be drawn into that love that defines their relationship with each other. That's what it means to have unity with God.

And then, as we are drawn into that love, we are infused with it; it flows into us, but it also flows through us. When we love each other with the same love that defines the relationship of God the Father and God the Son, we manifest the same unity as that shared by God the Father and God the Son. And in that miraculous manifestation, the world sees and knows God who is love – the world is invited to share in that love. And maybe, just maybe, the horrors of our world are lessened.

This is Jesus' prayer. It's a prayer he prayed in the presence of the first disciples. But it wasn't just meant for them. It was meant for us as well. It's not just a prayer of asking; it's also a prayer of commissioning, in a way. First the ask – for unity with God and with each other – then the commissioning – that the world would know Jesus was sent by God and that the world would know God's love. Listen again, one more time, to John 17:20 – 26. I'm going to read it from *The Message*. May you hear Jesus' voice praying for you in these words.

“I'm praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me. The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind – just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. The same glory you gave me, I gave them, so they'll be unified and together as we are – I in them and you in me. Then they'll be mature in this oneness, and give the godless world evidence that you've sent me and loved them in the same way you've loved me.

Father, I want those you gave me to be with me, right where I am, so they can see my glory, the splendour you gave me, having loved me long before there ever was a world. Righteous Father, the world has never known you, but I have known you, and these disciples know that you sent me on this mission. I have made your very being known to them – who you are and what you do – and continue to make it known, so that your love for me might be in them exactly as I am in them.

Amen.

ⁱ Meda Stamper. “Commentary on John 17:20-26.” *Working Preacher*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, May 2022).