

TOGETHER*by Elaine Poproski***JOHN 17:20 – 23**

I'm reading from John 17, focusing on verses 20 – 23. This part of a larger passage. It's part of the Last Supper. It comes right before Jesus and the disciples are going to leave, and Jesus will be arrested and crucified. This is a prayer Jesus is praying for his disciples. He prays this way:

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 – 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.

Last week we talked about the idea that church – our whole Christian faith, actually – is about more than just *me*. We talked about the metaphor of the Body that the Apostle Paul uses a few times when talking about the church. That's a metaphor that keeps going today. Last week we talked about the idea that the body consists of many parts – it's not just one big eye or one big ear. This week we're looking at the fact that all those parts, though they're different... a functioning body requires that those different parts work in concert with each other.

I have this weird thing that sometimes happens to my leg. On occasion it'll spasm. It's a really weird feeling. The leg will feel briefly like it needs to be stretched, and then it'll spasm for a few seconds before going back to normal. It only ever happens when I'm lying down and it's not related to any kind of underlying issue. But can you imagine if it happened while I was walking? I'd almost certainly fall over. Or what if it happened while I was sitting in a coffee shop with someone? They'd almost certainly have bruised shins. What if I was driving? If my leg did this weird thing – if it wasn't functioning properly – that would be a problem.

Have you ever known someone afflicted with Parkinson's disease? It's a horrible disease that makes my weird, occasional leg thing seem like nothing. Parkinson's is a brain disorder that causes unintended and uncontrollable movements throughout the body. Over time, things like walking and talking become impossible. It's a brutal disease in which the parts of the body stop working altogether.

I wonder, as we talk about the body being a metaphor for the church, is Parkinson's Disease an apt metaphor for the kind of body the church at large is today? Is it a body with all these different parts functioning in concert with each other, or is it unintended and uncontrolled spasming and causing it not to function well?

As many pockets of churches as there might be that are working together well (there are a lot of them; one of the things I love about this city is seeing how many churches work in concert with each other), I suspect there are far more examples of churches working together badly or not at all. And according to the research on which the book we're reading is based, this failure of churches to work well together is actually keeping people from wanting anything to do, not just with the church, but with the Christian faith.¹

The thing is, it's not just that we sometimes work together badly or not at all; it's that we are also too often judgmental and hostile toward each other, even when we're not trying to work together. Denominations and individual churches alike argue about who's closer to the truth and who's doing church correctly. People use the phrase, 'unity in the essentials' to talk about how churches can work effectively together, but they so often disagree on what those essentials are, the phrase has become almost meaningless.

And it's not just churches with other churches or denominations with other denominations. It's people within our own churches. If you've read this week's chapter of the book, *How to Revive Evangelism*, you'll notice that the author focuses almost exclusively on churches working with other churches. But I think we can't get there unless we've first figured out, as people in the church, how to simply be in unity with each other in our churches. First, our smaller, local body needs to function well and then that well-functioning body becomes a part of a larger well functioning body.

We sometimes work together badly (I don't mean *we, Walmer*; I mean *we, Christians*) – that is, if we choose to work together at all. We are sometimes judgmental and hostile whether or not we're trying to work together. How on earth can we hope to have unity across churches and denominations if we can't even figure out unity within an individual church?

We who are followers of Jesus have joined Jesus in his mission of establishing God's kingdom on earth. That means we tell people that the way the world is now, isn't the way God intends it to be. It means we tell people what God's kingdom is like by pointing to Jesus – his example and his teaching. It means we invite people to join Jesus' mission by accepting his lordship over their lives (which means Jesus gets to set the rules; Jesus gets to decide on the priorities). It means *we* live under Jesus' lordship, making his priorities our priorities and his ways our ways. It means hope for the world – hope that the utopian vision of God's kingdom need not be relegated to utopia, but may be realized among Jesus' followers as Jesus' followers are transformed by the Holy Spirit. The more we are transformed into Jesus' likeness by the Holy Spirit, the more we are on mission with Jesus establishing God's kingdom.

That is what we're supposed to be about. But how we go about it is the challenge, isn't it? I mean, for every church in the world there are probably at least two different ideas about how to go about joining Jesus in his mission of establishing God's kingdom on earth. There are all sorts of different ideas about what God's kingdom is like. Even though Jesus exemplified it, even though the entire Bible paints a picture of it, we come to different conclusions. We're influenced by the translations of the Bible we read, by our own cultural and historical biases, by our own preferences, and, if we're completely honest, by our own sin and selfishness.

It's not an accident that one of the last things Jesus did before his arrest and crucifixion, was to pray for his disciples. It's not an accident that a chunk of that prayer was for his disciples' unity. Listen again to what he prayed, in John 17, starting at verse 20:

My prayer is not for them alone [meaning the disciples who are sitting there at that table with him on that particular historical point in time], I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message...

That's us, he's praying for. Every time I read these words in John 17 I'm struck anew with amazement by this. This isn't some prayer out of history for people long since dead and buried. This prayer is for us. It's like Jesus looked ahead thousands of years and saw all of us – all who would follow him and call him Lord year after year, century after century, millennia after millennia. It's like he looked ahead and knew how hard it was going to be for us to stick together. So he prayed for us – for all of us – for you and for me here in this place today. Isn't that incredible?

I pray also [Jesus said] 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.

So, we have this Christian doctrine – this thing we believe as Christians – called the doctrine of the Trinity. It means we believe that somehow God is both God – a single, divine, indescribable being who was before even creation itself – and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – three persons – three divine beings who were before even creation itself, who are completely distinct from each other and yet, paradoxically, at the same time, one unified divine being. This doctrine of the Trinity isn't something most Christians can wrap our heads around. We try, and we see the evidence for it all through Scripture, but it's a paradox. It's a mystery.

Jesus is praying for us, that we would be as unified as the Trinity. He's praying that we would be as interconnected, as interdependent as are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's a big prayer. He's not just praying that we would all get along – that we'd speak nicely to each other or listen well to each other. He's saying, in essence, "Father, you know how we are together – how we are distinct and yet one all at the same time – that we are so completely interdependent that we are one? That's what I want for them."

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.

This is the point. This is why Jesus is praying for our unity. That the world – that people – would believe Jesus truly was the Son sent by the Father. It's interesting that our disunity is one of the things most likely to keep people from even wanting to hear about Jesus, never mind believe anything about him. No wonder this is the thing Jesus prayed in his last hours with his disciples.

The prayer continues: *I have given them the glory that you gave me,*

What he's talking about here has to do with the sense that Jesus was the incarnation of the Son. The Son became a human being and through his life, his teaching, his death, and his resurrection his true identity was revealed, as was God's mission of establishing his kingdom on earth. All of that is the glory Jesus is talking about here. And that revelation of Jesus' true identity and mission is the glory he gave us. But he's also talking about the likeness we bear to him as we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us. In his second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul put it this way: And all of us, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.ⁱⁱ This is what the Holy

Spirit is about. This is what Jesus wants for us – that we are being transformed into the image of Christ. In that there will be unity.

I know that whole glory thing is kind of complicated sounding. Sometimes when I listen to this it makes me think of Jesus in all of his divine glory, and think, “He’s given that to us? I’m not feeling that! I’m not seeing that.” We are not Jesus. We are not divine. That’s not the kind of glory he’s talking about. He is talking about this revelation of who he is; it’s the reality that God really is about the process of establishing his kingdom on earth.

The point of what Jesus is saying here isn’t really about how we define what he means by *glory*. The point is the whole ‘that they may be in me as I am in you’ thing. Here’s what he prays:

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 – so that they may be brought to complete unity.

This is the point. That we would know the kind of unity with each other as do the three persons of the Trinity. But that’s not the whole point. This isn’t just about us. Our unity is a means to an end. Jesus has no interest in establishing God’s kingdom here and there among pockets of disciples. His mission is nothing less than the transformation of the entire world – the establishment of God’s kingdom throughout the world, without even one little pocket that’s not influenced by God’s kingdom. His mission is not complete until those words from Philippians 2, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, are fulfilled. That’s when Jesus’ mission is done – when the entire world is God’s kingdom.

Jesus prayed, *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 – 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.*

This the nature of God’s kingdom: to know we are loved as intimately as the persons of the Trinity are the definition of love. (There’s another spot in the New Testament, in 1 John 4 where we read the simple statement that God is love.) That’s what it means for God’s kingdom to be established on earth as it is in heaven: that all people would know themselves to be loved as deeply as the persons of the Trinity are love. It’s the prayer we hear many Sundays at the end of the service, from Ephesians 3: I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge... I’m always struck by the inherent paradox of that prayer – that we would know this love that is way beyond our ability to truly know. This is God’s kingdom. And this kingdom requires us to be united.

Unity doesn’t mean being the same. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit aren’t the same, but they are the definition of unity. Their unity is so complete that even though they aren’t the same, together they are one God. This is the kind of unity Jesus wants for us – wants from us. It’s not a simple thing. It’s not an easy thing. If it were, surely there’d be a lot more of it, at least among Christians and churches.

Really, what it comes down to is loving each other. The kind of loving that puts the other ahead of the self. The kind of loving that inspires us to want to know each other so that we can support each other, celebrate with each other, grieve with each other... The kind of loving that means seeing people like God sees us. The kind of loving that means assuming the best of people and forgiving them when they cause us pain.

To love others is to provide space for them – space for their gifts and skills and talents, and space for their stories and experiences. Are we willing to listen – to truly listen in order to understand? If we aren't, we won't be able to love and we won't be able to be united. Are we willing to create and maintain a place of belonging – a place in which people are known and welcomed regardless of what baggage they bring with them? Are we willing to give people the space and the time they need to fully step into community with us?

To love others is to listen to them. It's to listen in order to understand, not to rebut or argue or condemn, but simply to understand. It's to speak with gentleness and humility. It's to have patience for others' struggles and flaws, allowing God's timing and priorities to take precedent over ours. It's about trusting that the Holy Spirit is working, not just in me, but also in you, and to therefore have no need of doing the Holy Spirit's work him. Just because I don't see the transformation happening in another person, doesn't mean it isn't happening. Loving means trusting the other to God and being in it with them, whatever *it* may be.

It's a tall order, isn't it? This loving people thing? And if loving people is the recipe for unity, then no wonder we have such trouble with unity. Jesus knew this would be hard for us. That's why he prayed for us. He knew loving most other people isn't something we're capable of in our own power. That's why we need the Holy Spirit to do the work in us, to transform us into Jesus' likeness. That's why we need to be freed from the power of sin in our lives – which is what Jesus did on the cross. That's why Jesus prayed that we would be brought to complete unity – unity as intimate and as interdependent as that of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He knew we can't do it on our own.

We were never asked to do it on our own. Our unity is the result of Jesus. Through Jesus we are adopted into God's family. Through Jesus we are already citizens of God's kingdom. Through Jesus it is possible for all the parts of this body that is the Church to function as one – each part knowing where it fits – knowing *that* it fits – and celebrating and upholding the other parts. It's not us who does the great work of creating this thing; it's Jesus who does it in us.

There's a spot in the New Testament where we're told, Seek first the kingdom of God, and everything else will be added to you. All these things we're worried about and anxious about... let's focus on the kingdom of God – let's focus on Jesus – and everything else will flow from there. It's the same thing here where we talk about unity – where we talk about loving each other. If we focus on Jesus, we become able to love because the Holy Spirit does the work in us that's required to make it possible for us to love.

Here's the question (questions, really): Are we, together, so connected to Jesus that we are living testament to Jesus? Are we, together, a testament to God's deep love? What stops you from

participating fully in the Christian unity that Jesus prayed for? What might it look like for Walmer to be truly united with the larger, global Christian Church?

ⁱ Craig Springer. *How to Revive Evangelism*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 159.

ⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 3:18.