

A Prayer For Community

John 17: 20-26

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God never intended for any of us to live the Christian life alone. That is why we have been given the gift of community. But at the mere mention of the word community (and church) or that you and I belong to a community of faith, some people might eye us as if we had dropped in from another world, smile tolerantly, and hope we change the subject. They fear that we're going to tell them they have to sell all they own, move to a farm, wear bib overalls, and raise baby goats or peanuts. Or that they have to abandon their fertilized lawns and move to the inner city. Even Christians themselves misunderstand the role and purpose of community.

In a way, the idea of community is, in a sense, of another world, a world very unlike our own. But it is neither from the world of communes in Vermont nor from the placid world of cookies and tea Christians share before they rush back to their isolated lives. Community is from the world as God wants it to be. It is the gift of a rich and challenging life together, one that we need and can receive with joy in any circumstance.

In the next few weeks, I like to explore with you the theme of community and the gifts we might find within it. As we, as a community, live in challenging times together, it might help us to remember why we are here, why we have sought membership and/or presence in this community of faith, why we come Sunday after Sunday, claiming the same pew. And it is important to remind ourselves who has gathered us here and for what purpose.

We are here, this community of faith, and the Christian church at large, because of Jesus. It was his life, ministry, death and resurrection that had gathered people in the first place.

Now Jesus was not the one who started the church. That credit should go the 1st generation of followers and the apostle Paul. But Jesus knew about community – how to create it, how to nourish it, how important it is. But I think he also knew how fragile it is, how easily the bonds among people could be broken because they forget why they have gathered in the first place.

In our scripture reading for this morning we find Jesus praying. This prayer is placed just before the passion story - his trial and crucifixion. According to John, Jesus gathers his disciples for a last meal; he washes their feet, setting an example of what it means to serve. He shares bread and wine with them, and then gives them the commandment to love another. And then he tries to prepare them for his departure in his lengthy farewell instructions.

The disciples are having a hard time comprehending what is happening; maybe they cannot hear him through their confusion and fear. He assures them that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit will guide them through this dark time. And then he does one more thing: he prays for them.

He knows the community he has created around him, is fragile. He already knows that one of them will fall away and betray him, and the rest of them will run away at first. He senses their anxiety, confusion, and fear. He worries about the ones he loves; the ones who have shared the last three years with him on the road. He tells them that they do not have to do everything or even understand everything. He tells them that he is there to support them, that they are not alone, and that they are valued and loved, even in their imperfection.

It's a powerful moment. And one of the amazing things about this passage is that Jesus doesn't do this only for them, but also for us. As Jesus prays, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word..." And that includes us! We are the latest in a long line of persons who have been inspired and encouraged to believe because of the words and lives of those who have gone before us.

And what does Jesus pray for "That they may be one." That we may be one – one with each other, one with Jesus and God, one with ourselves.

What does it mean “to be one” –in Christ and with one another, just as Jesus was one with God? What does living into this Oneness with God and Christ look like, or should look like? Is Jesus simply lifting up an ideal or does he think it is something that might be achievable?

The pessimist would say that “Oneness” is impossible. The division and boundaries, hatreds and wars that humankind has developed and engaged in ever since the dawn of time, speak against the possibility of Oneness. In fact, humankind has mastered the art of division. They are everywhere: within ourselves, our families, our churches, our nation. There are division among male or female; rich or poor; gay or straight; Hispanic or Anglo; Christian or Muslim; conservative or liberal; educated or uneducated; young or old; heaven or earth; divine or human; sinner or saved; orthodox or heretic. The list is endless. And if we are honest with ourselves, we promote a lot of these divisions because they help us protect of who we are and what we have.

The refugee crisis in Europe is just one of many examples we could lift up. If we were truly one, people would not have to leave their homes in the first place because of war and persecution. But because we are not "One", about 57 million people in this earth have been displaced. In this moment of time, millions have been displaced in the Middle East. Hundreds of thousands are trying to reach Europe for a better and safe life for their families and themselves. They are risking their lives, and too many have lost their lives in the process. Hungary has decided to put up a fence to stop this invasion of desperate people, trying to protect what they have. Nobody in the European Union really wants these refugees, others have reached their limits taking people in.

In light of such crisis, written agreements and treaties and covenants might help us in dealing with boundaries and divisions but I have my doubts that they will change hearts and minds. And that is actually not the kind of oneness that Jesus is praying about, praying for us to achieve.

Jesus knew that the world would remain as it always has – divided, intolerant, boundary-happy. He still prays for oneness. He prays that we would be one as he and the Father are one so that our oneness would be the revelation of God’s presence to the world. Oneness with God in the midst of differences and divisions becomes a sacramental presence of God still being alive in and engaged with this world.

Oneness in God through Jesus bring a whole new quality to life – living the way God lives; living with God’s unconditional love in our hearts and in this world.

Oneness in God does not mean that all differences can and will be eliminated. But we can live differently into those differences without them being destructive and divisive. Living into our differences with love changes them and us.

Jesus tells us over and over to love God, neighbor, self, and enemy. The way we love reveals our oneness, and the measure of our oneness, our God-likeness. In love there may be differences but no division.

I have heard a lot of people say and assume that because we are a church, we are a Christian community bound by Jesus’ love, that we should be a place free of division and differences. According to the world we should be the most peaceful place on earth, and everyone would want to join us.

Community is an interesting construct. Here we have a group of people as diverse as it gets – some are related to each other but the majority are not. We bring into this place all of who we are - our different backgrounds, persuasions, opinions, styles, personalities. We are thrown together with people we might not socialize with outside this place, or see eye to eye on many issues, or agree with about how things should be done. There are people we like and people we don’t. And yet, here we are – from long-time member to newbie and everyone in between, and we are here to make God’s love know to the world. It is into this community that Jesus prays for unity, oneness in Christ for the sake of love. If that is not a worthy challenge, I don’t know what is.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a small book entitled “Life Together.” It was part of his doctoral thesis. The first chapter is on Christian community. He basically says that the harmony we often envision to be the foundation of community is a ‘wish dream’, something that is not at all likely or even possible, and that we should not be disillusioned if the Christian community does not meet expectation of peace and calm and happiness. He makes the point that it is through our struggles within community that we see more clearly and be all the more grateful for what Christ has done for us.

Christ died because of his love for us and this world. With all our individual wants, our struggles, our hurts, and yes, sometimes our hurting one another, this is where God put us and this is who God put us with to learn from and to grow with.

That is a bit of a surprise, isn't it? How often do we try to resolve conflict quickly under the radar and Bonhoeffer appears to be saying that it is not only to be expected, but it is also something we are called on to be grateful for. I think he is right – I don't like it, but I think he is right. It is in our differences, in our struggles, in our hurts that we encounter and receive God's grace and gift most completely. There are times when we have to be encouraged to take a second look to see Christ in our neighbor. It is then that we are able to be loved in spite of ourselves. It is then we know most deeply our need for God.

Bonhoeffer said something else: "He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes the destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial." (p. 27)

It takes commitment to be and remain in community when we are hurt or disappointed or when a group of people does not live up to "my" expectations. It is important to remember that each and every person in this community is a gift to the other, not just in good times, but in the hard times as well. And yes, it would be easy to stay away, or leave for good.

But I believe that our faith tells us that this is not God's chosen path for you and me. Our faith calls us to have patience to live through the struggle. And when we do that we might discover that our connections with one another do go deeper than we ever thought possible. When we struggle together this deeply and yet remain "One", we will experience God's amazing grace. It is then that community becomes truly a gift to us. Amen

Sources:

Life Together by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paperback edition, Harper Collins, 1954