

Sermon – May 29, 2022
“So that they may be one”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: John 17:20-26

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning. Christ is Risen. He is Risen indeed. I don't know how many of us remembered that this past Thursday was Ascension Day, the day that Jesus ascended to heaven. Jesus had been appearing to the disciples since Easter morning, but on Ascension Day, Jesus appeared to a group of his followers and instead of disappearing, he ascended as they watched to heaven. Let me read Luke's account starting with 24:50 and reading through verse 53: "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." When Jesus left the disciples when he died on the cross, they were very sad and afraid, hiding in the upper room. Notice that when Jesus is carried up into heaven, the reaction of the disciples is different. They worship Jesus and then return to Jerusalem with great joy and are found continually in the temple blessing God. The disciples are awaiting Jesus' promise to clothe them

with power from on high that they may proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all nations, starting in Jerusalem. They are in the temple and they are blessing God as they anticipate these new spiritual clothes. Next Sunday, we will celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. And yes, look for some bright clothing to wear, but let me challenge us to make time throughout the next seven days to praise God and to pray asking Jesus to send the Holy Spirit anew to us. Let us, like these disciples, spend time each day preparing our hearts for the Holy Spirit to be poured out anew on and into us. And as we pray, ask Jesus what he is asking each of us to do so that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in Jesus' name to all nations, beginning here in Burgess and Ophelia. Plan each day to thank God for loving us enough to send Jesus to die on the cross for our sin and then joyfully ask Jesus to send the Holy Spirit on and into us. Lean into Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit until Pentecost.

This morning's scripture is the end of Jesus' high priestly prayer found in John's Gospel. It is a prayer Jesus prays to God in the hearing of his disciples just before they leave the upper room and head out into the night to go to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus has given his disciples parting instructions. The giving of Jesus' Word, the Word the Father gave to Jesus, has ended. Jesus will now turn to the cross and fully submit to the will of the Father. For those of us who write in our Bibles or are taking notes, write down "Jesus prays." At the end of Jesus' teaching when all has been said, Jesus prays. In this time of prayer, we are invited into a moment when Jesus stops teaching and prays. We too should be those who stop what we are doing and pray. Think of this moment as if our own family has arrived at their last journey together as a family. We have been given final instructions before we leave, such as where we are going, and where we will stop, and now the leader of our family has stopped instructing us about the trip and instead prays to God. A difference from our family prayer is that when Jesus prayed this prayer, he prayed to the Father not just for the disciples present but for all who will believe in him because of the disciples' words. Let's look at some of Jesus' prayer.

One of the first points Jesus makes is that the world is to come to believe in Jesus based on what they see in and hear from those who follow Jesus. Those who follow Jesus are to be radically different from the rest of the world. Those who follow Jesus are to have a unique and complete one-ness with each other, a unity those in the world see, and when the world encounters this unity in Jesus' followers, they will realize that Jesus was sent by God, the Father. Please realize that when I speak of "the world," I am not speaking negatively of those who do

not believe. That is not how John uses “the world” in his Gospel. I speak, or try to speak, of those in the world as those who are so loved by God that He gave His only begotten Son that they may be saved. God loves “the world,” and we also are to love the world, not for what they do, but for the image of God that is within those of the world and because God loves them. Please take my use of “the world” in that context. The actions of those in the world may not be holy and pleasing to God, but God loves them with His steadfast love.

When we speak of “one-ness” or unity among believers in Jesus Christ, what we are speaking to is a group of people anywhere in the world who are united with each other in their commitment to Jesus and to the Father. Unity for believers is grounded in the unity we see in the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Our unity is to reflect this perfect unified relationship. It is a unity that is to be visible to the world as the love we have for Jesus, as love we have for other believers, and as love we have for those in the world. It is not a unity that is driven by human will and energy. It is a unity found in Christians who believe in Jesus. It is a unity that sees the model of the unity Jesus has with the Father and seeks to live that model in the now of their lives. It is a unity that is created when believers are indwelt by the Father and Son and receive new birth. Unity of this nature draws those who do not know Jesus into the body of Christ. Those in the world hunger for this type of unifying love in their lives. Yet, it is a love they cannot find in the world but that they see when they see us in the world living in unity with each other but not living as those of the world.

Let’s look more at the love that Jesus is praying about in this prayer. As we do, we should understand that the world does not come to belief in Jesus through Jesus’ short presence on earth. As believers, it is our own continued presence and the sharing of the love of Jesus and the Father with them that brings those in the world to belief. The relationship Jesus and the Father share is that they are one. Their unity is a complete and perfect love. When we become believers in Jesus, Jesus indwells us, and since the Father is in Jesus, we also have the Father in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. With this inward loving relationship present in us, our one-ness as followers of Jesus becomes our continuing witness to those in the world we are sent to by Jesus. The one-ness that we are to have reflects the one-ness of the Father and Son. This is what draws the world to Christ. This is our mission to the world. We are not sent to the world to convert them, but to love them with the love Jesus and the Father share, a love we have been invited into and that we show to the world when we love one another. We need to realize that in each

generation, belief in Jesus of those in the world is undecided and needs our witness of one-ness and unity as a witness and invitation to the world. The witness of the prior generation is no help. This is our time to be witnesses to the world.

There are two aspects to unity in Christ: obeying Jesus' commands and loving each other. The Church has the truth, Jesus' Word, given to Jesus by the Father and shared by Jesus with the apostles who wrote his words down for us, thereby giving them to the Church. These words are not an alternate set of opinions based on some outdated ideas from 2000+ years ago. They are the revealed Word of God through Jesus. They are the truth, and when the world encounters God's truth, those in the world should sense the strength and conviction believers have to the words of truth they have received from Jesus, through the apostles, in the power of the Holy Spirit. God's Word, truth, is the anchor that the Church must use, the Word of God revealed through Jesus Christ. This is the rudder we are to steer by as we live in the world and not of the world. Earlier in Jesus' prayer (17:17), he prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." This is the truth we must know and live as we seek to witness to the world. We must be those who study God's Word, read God's Word, hear God's Word, dwell in God's Word and share God's Word with the world.

Jesus leaves this time with the disciples in the upper room to go to the cross and complete his mission to end death through his death. His disciples are being commissioned during this time in the upper room to continue his mission. This is the glory Jesus gives to us. We are to be those who are at work with him in his mission, taking his words and love to the world that those in the world may believe. Jesus' prayer of consecration is not for the twelve disciples alone but is for all who believe in Jesus. All are consecrated to learn Jesus' Word, love as Jesus loves, and then go out into the world to continue Jesus' mission. This is our job, to show the world our unity through the love of Jesus Christ as we join him in his mission to the world. We, as those who seek to follow Jesus, need to ask ourselves if we are in unity with each other in Christ and are being effective witnesses to the world in this place. If we are, then we should praise Jesus for the love he shows the world through us. If not, then we need to repent of what keeps us from unity in Christ with each other and seek to become effective unified witnesses for Jesus to the world.

In this final prayer to the Father, notice that Jesus states his desire, that those also, whom the Father has given to Jesus, may be with him and see his glory. Jesus' prayer is for those who

believe in him to be with him and see his glory. Jesus has ascended to heaven in a resurrected body and has again the glory there that he had before the foundation of the world. The Church, now present on earth, is the place where Jesus' glory is to be continued in us as a witness to the world. In the Old Testament, God's glory was seen in and over the tabernacle as God came and dwelt with His people. In the New Testament, Jesus replaces the temple and dwells within us. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, now comes and dwells in us, and as we are indwelt, we are to be those who reflect Jesus' glory to the world. It is a testimony that the world cannot deny and will hunger for when they witness our unity in Christ. This is how Jesus ends his prayer, asking the Father "that I may be in them." Jesus will no longer be with them, but in them, enabling them to love as the Father loves that we may be one in Christ. Our concern is not about where Jesus is but that we will be with him.

We are now hearing many calls for unity in the United Methodist Church (UMC). The struggle in the UMC is moving forward through the actions of opposing groups towards what we hope will be a time of amicable separation and blessings between these groups in the UMC. These conflicts driving the groups forward are conflicts between ideas and "truths" that the world holds, whose presence is growing in the UMC, and the truth found in God's Word. As we consider the one-ness we are to have as the people of God, a one-ness that is with Jesus, with the Father, and with each other, we must guard our pursuit of unity against compromises that set aside the truth found in God's Word. We must be on guard not to set aside God's truth in exchange for the world's truth. We must guard against attempts to keep or find unity that results in the setting aside of the truth of God for the false truths of the world. Our role is to seek to be those who are one in Christ and hold to the truth of God's Word. This is a struggle that requires us to keep our eyes on the Good Shepherd and to listen carefully for his voice as we seek to follow him in his mission to the world. We should anticipate that as we seek to take Jesus to the world, we will find conflict with our own needs for purity, holiness, and separation from the world and our mission of loving the world as God loves the world, a love that must be present among those of the world to be effective. We will need the Good Shepherd to guide us and help us balance this conflict and to help us hold fast to the truth found only in God's Word. We must not compromise God's truth in the name of unity, and yet we are to be one with each other in Christ and love the world as God loves the world. Unity becomes a challenge among the conflicting challenges found in our denomination, and we must listen carefully for the voice of

the Good Shepherd to discern where the Good Shepherd is leading and to unify with Christ where he is at work in the world. Our unity is to seek the love the Father has for Jesus so that Jesus may be in us and bring us to unity with each other. This is the unity that the world will see and that will witness to them the love of the Father for them. Let us hear Paul's words this morning about the love of Christ as we close. This is from Romans 8, verses 37-39: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Pray with me: Jesus, open our ears to hear your voice and our hearts to follow you. Fill us anew with the love the Father has for the Son so that Christ may be in us and we may be one. Guide our steps as we seek to hear your voice and follow you. Help us, Lord Jesus, to be more than conquerors through your love for us that we share with the world. Amen.