

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Pettit
May 9th, 2021
John 17 and Psalm 133

We've been talking about God's love the last couple of weeks through metaphors and imagery: God as a shepherd, and we as both the sheep under the shepherd's care and the guest in the shepherd's tent. God is a vine that gives life to the branches, and we are those branches that find our sustenance through him. Today we return to the narrative somewhat, the narrative of Jesus preparing his disciples for his death and resurrection. He is preparing them for his death and for carrying on the message and ministry after he is gone. However, while we return to the storyline, this moment is more than just a narration of what happened. This prayer of Jesus for his followers gives us a window into his heart. We get to overhear his worries and concerns for those he has loved and those he has sought to prepare.

And so, even while we return to the narrative, on this day, Mother's day, I couldn't help but hear the parental-like language, instincts, worries, and angst in this prayer. As the father has sent Jesus, Jesus now sends his followers. Have you been a parent, a teacher, a mentor, or a leader or officer responsible for preparing a group? If so, perhaps you can identify with some of the love and concern expressed here, with this responsibility of preparing them to go on without you. I think of the poem we read this morning, of this window into a child who only realizes later the protective instinct and actions of her mother. She recalls and becomes aware of the energy her mother put into taking care of her. But even more, she realizes the effort to protect her spirits, to fill the time with conversation and music. You can feel the work and worry of a mother coming through in this short poem.

And while the poem captures that daily, weekly, yearly grind of caring for a child's body and spirits and keeping everything moving forward, launching them out on their own is a significant moment. As a parent in a world and economy that I find challenging for myself, I often question whether we are preparing our kids adequately to face it. Have you ever had similar thoughts with your own children, or students, or friends?

Jesus seems to feel something of those concerns. He prays for several things here. For one, he prays they would not lose their connection amid the confusion, difficulty, and testing that would come. This is eternal life, he says, "to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Eternal life as personal knowledge and connection. They could easily lose focus, get derailed or be misdirected. The leadership guru Steven Covey once wrote that the "main thing is

to keep the main thing the main thing.” Amid all the things you might be convinced are important and worth giving your energy to, remember the main thing: “This is eternal life, to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Another thing we hear running through this prayer is the sense that Jesus has done what he can. He has prepared them. He has faithfully fulfilled his task in imparting to them the things they need to know. “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.”

Jesus has done what he can, and now he prays that God would protect them. Verse eleven reads: “And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me.” Verse twelve: “While I was with them, I protected them.” Verse fifteen: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.” Have you ever prayed such a prayer for your own children, or students, or for a friend? Protect them. Keep them safe. Preserve them.

And we hear that protectiveness in the way he distinguishes his followers from the world. For early, in John 3, we hear that For God so loved the whole world. The world is the object and focus of God’s love. But here Jesus is focused on his own followers whom God had given him out of the world, and the world is portrayed as opposed to God’s word and God’s people. It is a place of resistance and opposition.

He prays for protection but also sanctification. He doesn’t want to remove his followers from this testing and the adversarial world, but he prays that the testing and trials that they would face would produce God’s character and transformation in their lives. For there are things you try to teach a child or a student or a friend, which will only truly be learned through experience, making mistakes and having the lightbulb come on. And Jesus prays that they might be sanctified, made holy and transformed, that their lives would come into line with the truth in the midst of these challenges.

And perhaps the theme that emerges the most in this prayer is that his disciples would stick together, that they would be one. “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

He prays for unity, but not a contrived sense of unity. He doesn't mean just "help them not to fight," or "help them to get along." He doesn't just mean coming together with a compromise. He appeals to a unity based in his own relationship to the Father and to the Spirit. "May they be one, as we are one."

Now I am not one typically inclined to systematic theology and its mind-numbing calculus. I'm more captivated by the poetry and narrative and metaphors and imagery that scripture continually uses to help us understand and relate to God and to the Christ. However, the trinity is one exception, one place where I joyfully venture into the DNA of God. And this is due primarily to the Scottish theologian James Torrance. In Torrance's view, Christ's love for us is a reflection of, an expression of, an outgrowth of God's own nature, that is, who the Father, Son, and Spirit are together. He argues that the trinity is an expression of community, that God is not a domineering father figure, nor a hierarchical tyrant, but a loving community. Father, Son, and Spirit comprising a community that is, in Torrance's words, "one of mutual love, mutual self-giving, mutual testifying, mutual glorifying." There is no vying for power or authority, no contesting of wills. A community of mutual love. This is what Jesus wants his friends to know. For to know the only true God is to know of this loving and self-giving community.

He desires that they would learn this life of mutual love, self-giving, testifying, glorifying. Like a parent or a teacher looking at the scary world, Jesus seems to worry that the obstacles and struggles may serve to divide and dismantle the bonds they had previously enjoyed. And Jesus seeks to anchor his followers in a common core and call: that his followers may know God the Father the way he does, that his followers might come to rest in that mutual love. It is a love free of domination and stubbornness and pride and hubris and competition.

Now, this kind of unity and oneness is hard to achieve, it seems to me. I mean it's one thing if you are at a backyard barbeque or in a casual lunch gathering when the only purpose is to be together, to have fun, to get along. Though even there, one might feel the competition for talk time, there might be a subtle pecking order, a subtle hierarchy, a subtle frustration between their strong opinions, a thin veneer over political differences. But how much more when you have a mission, when you have a task or calling to fulfill? How quickly do our differences come to the forefront; our different opinions, attitudes, and ideas? How does a group maintain that one-ness that is in the nature of God, that mutual love, mutual self-giving, mutual glorifying?

Our Psalm carries this sort of prayer as well. It is a prayer of unity. Some have suggested that the cultural moment in view in this psalm is the moment when the father of the extended household has passed and before the next head of the house is named. It is a moment of power vacuum, a moment that could be filled with contention and disagreement and vying for position or possessions. “How very good and pleasing it is, when brothers dwell together as one.” No competition, selfish pursuits, or self-justification.

And so, in the vacuum of Christ’s absence that his friends would feel at the crucifixion and those three days, and in the absence that will come following his ascension, he prays for his friends. He has done what he can to prepare them. He has passed on God’s words. He will glorify himself before them in his death and resurrection. And while he prays that God would protect them, he also prays that they would come to love and transform the world. “The glory that you have given me I have given them, 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 you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

And we, who continue in this line of Christ’s followers, we too are called to carry on the life and work of the church. He prays for us too. For we face our own challenges. The world changes rapidly. Some have suggested that this age is one of the great tectonic shifts where the shape of the church and ministry is going to radically change, as with many aspects of the world. And so, like a parent, teacher, or mentor launching their pupil into the world, Christ prays these same things for us too. Therefore, we might pause for a moment to hear his greatest concerns for us.

We pause to remember that this is eternal life, to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. And so, in the midst of all the change and tug-of-war, of all the differences and social changes that cause the church to fight with itself, let us not lose sight of this. Let us remember that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. And this is eternal life – to know God.

He prays for our protection. Protect them from the evil one. But this is not a protection in the sense of keeping us separate from the world. “I am not asking you to take them out of the world,” Jesus prays, but that we might be sanctified, to made holy and transformed, that our lives would come into line with the truth. May the challenges we face forge Christ's image in us.

And he prays that we might be one, as God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one. And this unity is not just a get along philosophy, or don’t upset the apple cart

kind of approach. It is learning, discovering, and living out the love and community at the very core of who God is. And it is a unity, a oneness that works together in mission and ministry to change the world.

Christ prays for us, and for good reason. For like any mother who has driven her kid back and forth over a couple decades, and who has corresponded with teachers, and portioned out vitamins, and comforted on tearful nights, Jesus knows that to launch his loved ones out into the world is no small thing. There are many pitfalls. But there is also this note of hope and confidence and anticipation to see what they will accomplish, and how God might use these children for his purposes in the world.

So we carry on Christ's commission, because he made God's heart and mission known to us, and Christ has revealed it to us, so that the love that is God at God's core may be in us, because even while Christ is not physically with us, he is in us. May we walk in that comfort and power, so that the world may know this love as well.