

So That the World May Know
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: John 17:20-26

Have you ever heard someone pray for you? I mean out loud, by name, ask for you the gift of God's blessing and grace? It is an experience that is both humbling and liberating, profoundly intimate, and empowering. One of the reasons we print the names of individuals (with their permission of course) is to remind them and us that God's love is personal and particular; God cares for all people with health issues, including_____.

The morning text is a small portion of a much longer section presented as a prayer delivered by Jesus at the end of his earthly ministry. Like a stone dropped into a calm pool, the prayer ripples outward from immediate to wider concerns, beginning with prayer for the close circle of Jesus' disciples and ending with a petition for the whole world in every time and place.

The gospel of John is different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke in that it is less a biography of Jesus as it is the early church's reflections upon Jesus' identity and ministry. Who is Jesus Christ, and what is the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection? In John we don't find the parables and pithy sayings the other gospels record; instead we read longer and more complex discourses—the prayer from which our text is taken runs an entire chapter. Its theme is a response to the worry of the first-century faith community about carrying on Jesus' mission without his physical presence. How are we going to proclaim the distinctive gospel message in a hostile or indifferent environment? How can we live without Jesus at our back? The opening paragraphs of the prayer intercede for those first followers, but then the focus shifts. Consider this, then, Jesus' prayer for the church gathered here to worship some 2000 years later....a prayer for you and me. Hear God's Word in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the seventeenth chapter, at the 20th verse.

[JOHN 17:20-26]

From the ancient Sufi comes a story about a seeker who went from land to land to discover an authentic spirituality. Finally the seeker found a group known for the goodness of their lives, the loyalty of their hearts and the sincerity of their service. "I see all of that," the seeker said, "and I'm impressed by it. But before I become your disciple, I have a question to ask: Does your God work miracles?" One of the group responded, "Well, it depends on what you mean by a miracle. Some people call it a miracle when God does the will of people. We call it a miracle when people do the will of God."

Seen any miracles lately? The quest for authentic spirituality gets turned around when the goal shifts from individual fulfillment to divine purpose. Here in the gospel of John, Jesus prays for such miracles: that the believers may have the same love and power he has demonstrated in his own life, and that they experience the mystical sense of belonging of the relationship between Jesus and God.

Curiously, the spirituality for which Jesus prays is revealed in the unity of its adherents. Twice in these seven verses Jesus prays "that they may all be one." Additionally, this unity will provide the compelling evidence to the world that God's love is universal; it is for outsiders as surely as it is for the insiders. Imagine a community so united, so free from the contention and conflict that divides and separates, that it could work miracles so that "the world may know" that God sent Jesus to show God's love for all.

.... it is a prayer still to be fulfilled. There is precious little evidence of the unity of Christ's church. "The Ecumenical Movement" is on the wane, as denominations close ranks in fear of their own survival. The Presbyterian Church is not alone in its struggle for unity amid deep divisions around biblical interpretation, human sexuality, and ordination standards. Para-church, mega-church, and non-denominational fellowships have sprung up to respond to the spiritual hunger of our age; yet they too seem to find unity largely in unanimity of narrowly defined beliefs and rigidly prescribed behaviors. In other words, if we all look alike and think alike and believe alike, we are united.

The "spell checker" in my computer didn't catch the typographical error I made a couple of times in the course of writing this sermon. Transpose only one letter and you'll find "united" transformed into "untied." Similarly, how easy it is to conclude from the church's actions that we are at loose ends, weak and ineffectual. An op ed piece that appeared in the *New York Times* not long ago about the mainline churches' debates over sexuality and church leadership cited evidence of a growing split between "the church of law" and "the church of love."

While I found the writer's characterization overdrawn and misleading, it provides alarming evidence that the world sees us as divided, and therefore weakened in our witness and mission.

Jesus' prayer holds out a much different vision for the church as a miracle-working community: one that seeks God's will for the church and the world. Our unity does not depend upon our agreement about doctrine or tradition or biblical interpretation or just about anything else. These are contingent. They have changed and will change as we learn and as we live.

Every true baseball fan has his or her favorite baseball story—the account of an exciting game or unbelievable play or colorful character. My own involves the racial integration of major league baseball. Jackie Robinson is an extraordinary American hero, whose dignity and resilience in the face of bitter resistance helped change this nation's racist practices. Branch Rickey was the manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers largely responsible for hiring Robinson. One of Rickey's daughters remembers that on the night before Robinson's contract was announced, news commentator Lowell Thomas predicted, "Branch, tomorrow all hell will break loose." To which Rickey replied: "Tomorrow all heaven will rejoice." True unity is not created by denying differences or by silencing dissent, but by seeking together the joy of heaven and fulfilling it on earth.

One of the reasons I am excited and hopeful about Fairmount's leadership in efforts to convert the former Heights Presbyterian Church into a youth center is because it will bring together diverse churches, synagogues, civic groups, and individuals to address a common need and work for a shared beneficial outcome. It will be nothing short of a miracle, and a compelling witness to the power of community when sparked by Divine purpose.

This morning we heard witness of another dimension to the unity of the church beyond national borders. Dan and Jane Reynolds have seen "up close and personal" the effectiveness of Christian witness in the world. Today there are more Christians in Africa than in the United States and Europe, and the church is growing beyond expectation. A partnership with congregations in Ethiopia—in the Dominican Republic where a group of 46 Fairmounters will do mission early this summer—could become another way to embody our one-ness, so that the world may know that God is love.

The early church experienced how difficult it was—and probably sensed it always would be. Yet their response was not to pull in and concentrate on maintaining their cozy little community. They understood their mission—Christ’s mission, to be global, to go into ALL the world and to proclaim the gospel of salvation to ALL people. So what if they disagreed? Jesus had prayed not that they be taken out of the dangerous and ambiguous and unjust world, but that they be strengthened by God’s presence with them in the middle of it.

Friends, this is the source of our unity. Jesus prayed that we may be one, in the way he and God were one. A relationship of mutuality in which each abides in the other. Like a wise parent, Jesus has pushed us from the nest, and sent us into the world to join God’s own work of restoring and reconciling the whole creation. But we don’t need to feel anxious about the separation because Jesus remains with us, as Jesus is in God, and God is in us, so that we may be one.

Fairmount member Mary Sanders recently retired after twenty years as executive director of University Settlement, a social service organization that is transforming the lives of impoverished people in Cleveland’s Broadway neighborhood. A number of clients and co-workers honored her by creating a bird sanctuary in the front yard of the office building, and were at first dismayed when only sparrows commandeered the bird house and feeder. Mary however came to see it as a metaphor, one that described her mission. It’s not a bad one for the church either. “The sparrows come—just like us—hungry, graying, needing a home.”

For God so loved the world, that God sent the Son to be its Bread and Home and Life. Aware of our common need, let us serve with common purpose, until the world *knows...and we do too*.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO DO FAR MORE ABUNDANTLY THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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