

Biblical Foundations for the Task Force's Preliminary Report
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John 17:20-26: I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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. 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. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

I think this text is an important touchstone for all of us in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at this particular moment in our history, for it is a time in which many of us are down on our knees praying for the peace, unity, and purity of our denomination – a time when it is imperiled, when talk of schism is in the air. I find myself sticking very close to John 17 during these troubled days, for I need the reassurance it provides that the Lord Jesus is praying for us too – and whenever I turn to it, I find it a powerful experience to overhear him speak our names before God in fervent prayer for our unity.

Jesus in the Gospel of John is given to extended discourse and prayer. Recently I heard someone describe the Jesus in John this way: “Wordy is the Lamb.” It’s not a bad description! And the text I’ve read comes at the tail end of the longest prayer of Jesus in all the Gospels. As you know, it concludes Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, during which he prepares them for his departure and for life in this world in his absence. And then finally, before leaving the table and proceeding to the garden where he will be betrayed and arrested, Jesus turns to God in prayer – a prayer that disciples, then and now, overhear. As we eavesdrop, we hear Jesus pray first for himself, as he comes at last to the hour to which his whole ministry has moved. Then for his disciples, that they may be protected and upheld in their mission in the world – a continuation of his own. And then finally, he expands the circle of those for whom he prays, including those who will believe through the preaching of those first disciples – which is to say, he is praying for us – the church of the future. It’s a prayer that transcends the generations, that looks down the ages. We are overhearing the Lord Jesus lift our names and our troubled church before God in prayer. And chief among his petitions on our behalf is his prayer for our unity: “...that we may all be one. As you, Father, 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.”

And as we overhear Jesus' prayer, what may we discern about the unity of his followers, lest it slip from our grasp? Well, for one thing, it is clear that God is its source, for it is to God that Jesus prays. And he speaks of the relationship of oneness and love that exists between them – a unity that is foundational to any unity we claim. For Jesus opens up his relationship with God to include us – he incorporates all who believe in him into the relationship of oneness and love that he shares with God – a oneness and love that believers make visible and tangible in this world by their unity with each other.

Now unity with God in Christ is one thing. The hardest thing, I think, to overhear is Jesus' prayer for our unity with each other, for there may be no doubt of what it consists. For all those who believe in Jesus as the one sent from God – God's own Son who binds God to us and binds us to God and to each other as God's own children - that unity consists in one thing above all else: it consists in love. The language of love is the primary language by which Jesus in John speaks of the life of the believing community. The one commandment – the only ethical injunction he gives us in John: love one another. And it is important that we hear this clearly: that the unity believers share lies in something beyond doctrinal agreement, beyond institutional relatedness (important though these things be). It lies in our experienced love of God in Christ, which keeps us together in spite of our differences and links us with disciples past, present, and future. Mutual love is at the heart of John's vision of the Christian life – the identifying characteristic of the community that continues to exist in the world in Jesus' name. *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,”* [he said] *“if you have love for one another.”*

But it is equally important that we be clear about what this means. The love of which Jesus speaks is more than an emotion, a disposition. It is not that feeling defined by Hallmark greeting cards as “the feeling you feel when you feel you're going to feel a feeling you've never felt before.” Love, in the Old Testament and New Testament, is not something we feel – it is something we do. Love seeks the well-being of others and is expressed in concrete efforts on their behalf. And thus we must surely exegete justice as an expression of love, else any unity we claim will appear not only absurd, but deceitful. Love is something we do, redefined by Jesus' own act of self-giving. Love is something we do, regardless of how we feel, which is just as well, for it may come as a relief to know that we don't have to like everybody. We just have to love them.

Now of course, one of the peculiar things about the love commandment in John is that it is focused on the community of disciples. The Johannine Jesus does not say “love your enemies” or “love your neighbor,” but speaks instead of “in-house” love, calling Christians to “love one another”! But we ought not to assume too quickly that John's love commandment is thus easier to follow. Gail O'Day, in fact, wisely cautions us against dismissing the ethical seriousness of John's love commandment when she observes that

The history of the church and of individual communities of faith suggests that to love one another may be the most difficult thing Jesus could have asked. There are many circumstances in which it is easier to love one's enemies than it is to

love those with whom one lives, works, and worships day after day.” (“John,” *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. Newsome and S. Ringe, p. 302).

Do you think she’s right about that? I remember seeing an article in which a former moderator of our denomination talked about his service to the church, and what struck me was that he said he had never received so much hate mail in his life. He quoted from one unsigned letter that read, “Dear sir, I pray to God every day that you will die before you kill the church.” And that may be fairly mild rhetoric compared to that to which our most recent moderators have been subjected. You don’t have to listen very long to the nature of the rhetoric engulfing our denomination to realize that loving one another may be the very hardest thing that Jesus asks us to do! Ever hear of the little girl who was asked by her Sunday school teacher if she wanted to go to heaven, and said, “Not if all these people are going to be there”? I take comfort in the fact that Jesus promised there are many rooms in his Father’s house, and I must confess that sometimes I pray, “Please, please, please Jesus, as you prepare those rooms and make the reservations, don’t assign me to a room with someone from that particular affinity group! (I won’t tell you which one, in case you’re a member of it.) I think there is no doubt about it, in my own life at least, and perhaps in yours as well, that loving other Presbyterians in this time and place may in fact be the most difficult thing that Jesus could have asked us to do.

But to love Jesus is to be obedient to his commandment – to strive to embrace somehow the unity that is God’s gift to us in Christ. Not simply for our own sake, but for the sake of the world: “*I ask . . . that they may be one*” (Jesus prayed) . . . “*so that the world may believe that you have sent me, and have loved them even as you have loved me.*” How is the world to know God? To be challenged? Not only through hearing our witness to the gospel, but by seeing and experiencing the embodied witness of a community united in love of one another.

Now I think it is important to note that Jesus does not pray that we may all be the same, but that we may all be one – that we might love one another despite the differences that may divide us. The power of that kind of witness is captured, I think, in Kathleen Norris’s description of her first visit to a monastery. This is how she articulates her astonishment:

The person you’re quick to label and dismiss as a racist, a homophobe, a queer, an anti-Semite, a misogynist, a bigoted conservative, or bleeding-heart liberal is also a person you’re committed to live, work, pray, and dine with for the rest of your life. Anyone who knows a monastery well knows that it is no exaggeration to say that you find Al Franken and Rush Limbaugh living next door to each other . . . Barney Frank and Jesse Helms. Not only living together in close quarters, but working, eating, praying, and enjoying (and sometimes enduring) recreation together, every day.” (*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, p. 158).

That kind of witness cannot help but claim the attention of our polarized world, for only the divine love could be behind the mystery of it.

There is no question that the world is watching the PC(USA) right now, as we engage in highly publicized debates. To be “one” is not to say that we will be the same, that we will all agree, that there will be no conflict. But as we listen to Jesus pray, we are reminded that the quality of our life together – our ability to make visible the unique relationship that exists by God’s grace among us – is our most convincing testimony to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.

For this reason, Jesus’ prayer for our unity is the very heart of his prayer on our behalf – and at the heart of our ministry in the world in his name. May it be daily among our prayers for each other and our church as well. And Lord Jesus, keep praying for us too – *that we may all be one*, embodying in this world the divine love that is your gift to us, so that the world may know that God sent you.