

March 17, 2024

Lesson 3: Jesus Prays for the Church

Scripture: John 17:17-26

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “Encounters in Prayer and Love,” where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God’s presence in our lives. Our first unit titled “Jesus Prays,” is an examination of all the ways Jesus engages in prayer. Today’s lesson will be to affirm the importance of praying for the impossible.

Today’s scripture lesson continues our lesson from last week as we examined part of Jesus’ final prayer over his disciples at the Last Supper in the gospel of John. While all accounts of Jesus with his disciples at the Last Supper include words of prayer, John is unique as the final discourse and prayer give specific instructions as well as visions for the future of the church. The passage we read today has the “high-priestly prayer” in which Jesus gives both a proclamation and a thanksgiving.¹ For the first sixteen verses of chapter seventeen, the prayer is focused upon the disciples and Jesus’ prayer over them so they might be disciples of him and not the world. He does not pray for them to be taken out of the world. Instead, he prays they will be filled with the Spirit and the truth to continue his mission.

Verses seventeen through nineteen of Jesus’ prayer concludes his section over the disciples near him at the Last Supper. These verses include a focus on a continued sanctification in truth and focus on what Jesus has done in and through them.² Now as they move forward, Jesus will continue to shape and make them holy.

There is a shift in the prayer in verse twenty as Jesus moves from the disciples to those who would come to believe in him as a fruit of the disciples reaching out in his name. The big prayer for Jesus with all these disciples is they will be one in the Father and one in Jesus. Note how Jesus’ words do not focus on where the disciples think they should go. Jesus doesn’t pray for all who believe in him, “each in his own way,” as the modern world would paraphrase.³ Jesus wants all eyes to be on him and the belief in his message.

It is interesting as this text has high expectations from Jesus for his disciples and those who would come to know him, the body of believers we call the church. At the time of the gospel writer John, the community of faith was waiting for Jesus to return. There were questions around acceptable practices and how to engage with those not in the faith. There was even tension between those who came from the Jewish background who emphasized circumcision and those from a Gentile background who saw this as bodily mutilation. Yet the focus of Jesus was on hope, an invitation to live here and now with a focus on the life found in Jesus. All the way to heaven is heaven because Jesus said, “I am the way.”⁴ Being a part of Jesus’ journey is an

¹ Sloyan, Gerard. “John.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 196.

² Ibid., 198.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. 199.

invitation to yield one's self and one's opinions of the world and actually follow Jesus. There is an abandoning of the selfish view of the world and a look to someone else who offers something so much more life-giving.

Application

I think if we can look at the objective of today's lesson, we can see why this prayer Jesus prays is hard for his disciples and the church. The focus is to pray for the impossible. If we look at "the church," we discover very quickly when putting the word "unity," next to it, there has been a major miscommunication from the Lord to humanity. There's a reason when we talk about Christianity, we talk about a family tree. From age to age, the body of believers has struggled with the definition of unity. And yet this does not mean we should be quick to give up or disregard what Jesus asks. With the world we live in today, praying for the unity of Jesus Christ is something we need more than ever.

I have spent all of my life in places where the word "united," plays a central role in multiple areas in my life. I live in the United States of America. It is a country where states with very different cultures and very diverse people all come together as one country called America. From my travels and experiences, particularly with military families from when I was growing up, I came to love how this country could have so many people and stories. Of course, I learned the ugly parts too; how there was once a break in the 1800s and folks tried to divide the country over slavery. Yet when the dust settled with the Civil War done, the states had to figure out a way to become unified again. Even with its issues today, I still love saying I am from the United States of America because it is a land with freedom and human rights at its core.

In my religious life, I am a United Methodist Christian. Ever since the beginning of the Methodist church in this country, my family has belonged to a branch of the Wesleyan tradition, particularly the Methodist Episcopal Church. When the various branches merged in 1968 in response to the religious decline in this country, my family was swept up all in it seeing how connection is vital to our well-being as a body of faith. And the rest is history as my family and I have loved being a part of a connectional polity where while every church may be a little different, we are still part of a faith family. I love the United Methodist Church because in so many ways I am not sure I would know and have experienced the goodness of our Lord if it hadn't been for all the local churches, the Annual Conference, and institutions affiliated to the United Methodist Church like Birmingham-Southern College and Huntingdon College. And it was all because people older and wiser than me saw the importance of being united. I have received water from wells where I did not dig. Even with its issues today, I still love saying I am a United Methodist Christian.

All of this points to the counsel which I think Jesus gives us today. Often our world focuses on individuality. It is all about me and what I think and who I think is wonderful or good or saved. We like it when we call the shots, and we can tell others if they are wrong and how we are right. And the temptation is when we do not get our way or we see something we do not like, we storm off and throw the word "united" to the wind. We forget how Jesus calls us to think of unity constantly.

The beauty in unity is it does not mean you will agree with everyone on everything. I cannot think of one United States of American citizen or United Methodist Christian with whom I agree one hundred percent on everything. Yet what I can think of is how incomplete my life would be without various people from those same backgrounds in different components of my life. Being united does not mean being uniform, yet it does mean we search for meaning and

values which connect us together.

For Christians, unity should be at the core of our values because we have Jesus who asked us to be united in him. He doesn't care about our opinions or if we agree with people who live in a different state on an array of social issues. He cares about if we are following him and promoting his name with love in our hearts with both our neighbors next to us, and those we do not even know or like. Jesus is more focused on our discipleship and our seeking to be his hands and feet. He is more focused on unity than uniformity and thankfully for us, he is the one who judges and will deal with those who do not promote unity in his body.

Why do you think praying for unity can seem impossible? Why do you think Jesus wants us to pray for unity? How can you promote unity in the body of faith where you worship? How is unity a part of your identity? Why do you think unity is hard for Christians today?