

That We May Be One

John 17:1-11

¹ After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶ "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. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ 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. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ 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, so that they may be one, as we are one."

It was twenty-two years ago my family learned my mother had pancreatic cancer. Because of her health and age, the doctor explained the prognosis was not good. The good news was my mother had time to begin her "goodbyes" to family and friends. At such a time we have the opportunity to prioritize and decide what is important and what you can let go of. We moved my mother from her home in Wardell, Missouri to Dayton, Ohio, to the home of my sister Wanda and her husband, Rev. J. Thomas Johnson, where she could receive excellent hospitality and pastoral care. Each of her children took a week off work to spend time caring for her. It was a blessing because each of us had precious, intimate conversations that we will treasure for the rest of our lives. Another thing my mother did was to write letters to her two great granddaughters to share her grandmotherly advice when they would graduate from high school. My mother's prayer that we would be a loving and caring family and remember the lessons we had learned from her and my father.

These verses speak of Jesus' most urgent hopes for his disciples. While shaped here as his prayer, Jesus meant for his disciples—and for us two millennia later—to overhear his petitions. Hours from the crucifixion, Jesus focuses precisely on what matters most from his entire ministry. This desire to communicate one last time what is at the center of one's life and hopes is an enduring human experience. Commentator Nancy Ramsey shares a story from a colleague in ministry of a young mother dying of cancer in a hospital who finds purpose and energy from the opportunity to construct a video message for her preschool daughters, so that when they are older they can listen to what she most hopes will guide their lives. It is very important to her to make sure her daughters receive her motherly care and love, even though she will not be alive to speak to them in person. While this mother can only hope that the videotape will help keep her memory accessible to her children, Jesus speaks knowing that the Spirit who abides in us is able to keep his message alive in our hearts.

What is central among Jesus' concerns? For him the culmination of his work is that we know God through his life and ministry. His final hopes are not a celebration of himself, but the recognition that his life and ministry are windows into God's love and saving purposes. So, Jesus prays that people will come to *know* God through him. This "knowing" describes a powerful, active, confessional, and intimately relational claim on our lives. Knowing God is an experience that draws believers into a new reality in which the new order that will be shaped eternally by God's vision for love and justice and service can also be realized in relationships and communities now. Knowing God will be evident in our obedience to love. Love is what John's Gospel is all about and what Jesus' ministry is all about. In other words, eternal life has implications for the present and how we live our lives.

John's first century community realized the eternal life Jesus gives provides a dramatic contrast to Rome's claim to be the eternal city. John's Gospel contrasts

God's vision for humankind and the claims of the Empire. Sadly, little has changed for contemporary Christians. Jesus claims a different authority from that of Empire. It is God who authorizes him over all people to offer eternal life, which is so starkly different from the pretense of the claims of Rome, or our own government. God discloses a very different vision of what is true and worthy of the trust of those who live by faith.

For John's community, the term "world" most often refers to a dangerous and hostile place that opposes God's hopes for justice and love and mercy. In this passage Jesus prays not for the whole world but for those whom he has taught and guided into knowledge and love of God. He prays confidently for their (and our) protection in a hostile world. We know of the wideness of God's mercy in many other passages in Scripture. We all need God's protection from our own worst impulses as well as from others whom God also loves. What we can rely upon, as Jesus did, is the assurance of God's grace and care.

In a time when there is fear, social isolation, social distancing, a world-wide pandemic we say we are all in this together, there continues to be great divisions that threaten the unity of so many Christian communions, the relevance of Jesus' prayer that we believers may be one is striking. He prays from the framework of the profound intimacy he enjoys with God, an intimacy that elsewhere in John Jesus also ascribes to his relationship to the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit enjoy a positive interdependence that allows for difference. Perhaps this divine model is suggestive for how we may imagine our oneness in Christ. Surely it does not mean we must be identical in thought and practice, rather dynamic interdependence.

Just as Christians around the world grow more able to be in good communication and learn with and from one another, so we also find ourselves sorely tested by such things as radically different interpretations of the wideness of

God's love and the boundaries of the church; the full inclusion of all God's people; and deep and historically shaped emotions about the way God's vision for economic justice has implicated Christians in dominant and developing countries differently. Oneness will necessarily require that we seek ways to honor the particular gifts, experiences, and insights of each community of believers and also that we support one another through accountability to the Gospel that we hold in common.

Our oneness in Christ also faces new challenges as we recognize the urgency of interfaith opportunities to repair and build relationships among the Abrahamic religious traditions and beyond. We do well to remember how Hebrew prophets came to understand that God's love transcends a particular people and place, to create one human community linked by a covenant of mutual responsibility. We need to learn to recognize the image of God in the face of those who are not in our own image. To find God in the faces of all humankind surely is a goal of the eternal life into which Jesus invites us to live our commitments now. The God of Abraham intends that all the families of the earth be blessed. **Nancy J. Ramsay**

Like my mother, who knew she would soon leave her children, but prayed that we would continue in the faith and unity that she and my father taught and modeled for us; Jesus prayed “that we may be one; one family of faith, love and care. Let us find ways with the help of the Holy Spirit to make his prayer a reality in our lives and in our times.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.