

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 17:20-26

*I'm praying not only for them
But also for those who will believe in me
Because of them and their witness about me.
The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—
Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
So they might be one heart and mind with us.
Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.
The same glory you gave me, I gave them,
So they'll be as unified and together as we are—
I in them and you in me.
Then they'll be mature in this oneness,
And give the godless world evidence
That you've sent me and loved them
In the same way you've loved me.
Father, I want those you gave me
To be with me, right where I am,
So they can see my glory, the splendor you gave me,
Having loved me
Long before there ever was a world.
Righteous Father, the world has never known you,
But I have known you, and these disciples know
That you sent me on this mission.
I have made your very being known to them—
Who you are and what you do—
And continue to make it known,
So that your love for me
Might be in them
Exactly as I am in them.*

On Thursday of this past week, Christians all over the world celebrated Ascension Day, the day believed to have been the day Jesus ascended into heaven. It comes every year on the Christian calendar, 40 days after Easter Sunday on the Thursday of the sixth week of Easter.

In Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:1-11, Luke describes the ascension of Jesus after he appeared to and spent time with his disciples. In Luke we read that Jesus led his disciples to Bethany where he blessed them and ascended into heaven. In Acts, Luke details the ascension, saying that the disciples watched as a cloud received him from their sight.

Throughout his life on earth, Jesus worked with his rag-tag group of disciples, teaching them and molding them into the group who would continue his ministry in the world. We can read in the bible about times when he had some frustrations and concerns about whether they would be adequately able to continue the mission. Jesus knew that their ministry was going to be crucial to the continuing future growth of commitment, love, and faithfulness to God and God's will.

Today's scripture reading, interestingly, is the lectionary text for the Sunday after the Ascension. I chose to have this scripture read today from the Message translation instead of the

NRSV translation of the bible we usually use, because I believe this is one of those texts that, in many translations, can be confusing. The Message is easier to understand. The text is a portion of Jesus' prayer that he offered in the upper room with his disciples before he went to Gethsemane where he also prayed and then was arrested. It was a troubling time for Jesus; and he knew it would also be immensely challenging for the disciples, too.

Three ministers were talking about prayer in general and the appropriate and effective positions for prayer. As they were talking, a telephone repairman was working on the phone system in the background.

One minister shared that he felt the key was in the hands. He always held his hands together and pointed them upward as a form of symbolic worship. The second suggested that real prayer was conducted on your knees. The third suggested that they both had it wrong--the only position worth its salt was to pray while stretched out flat on your face.

By this time, the phone man couldn't stay out of the conversation any longer. He interjected, "I found that the most powerful prayer I ever made was while I was dangling upside down by my heels from a power pole, suspended forty feet above the ground."

Many a prayer has been offered during troubling moments when people feel like they are dangling from a pole high above the ground. One might argue that Jesus may have been feeling this way when he prayed this prayer recorded in John 17. Jesus knew his ministry on the earth was coming to an end. These six verses that we read are the closing of the true "Lord's Prayer." We have the prayer we call the "Lord's Prayer," which is a prayer Jesus gave us to help us know how to pray. This prayer on the other hand, is a passionate prayer offered to God from Jesus' own concerned heart.

The prayer can be divided into three sections. First, Jesus prays for himself. Secondly, he prays for his disciples; and thirdly, he prays for the universal church. For John, the heart of this prayer is the theme of oneness. Throughout the Gospel of John, we encounter the theme of oneness. Examples are: "Jesus and the Father are one (10:30; 17:11), and Jesus desires all who come to faith to be one (vv. 21, 23). There is to be one flock and one shepherd (10:16). Even Jesus' seamless robe (19:23-24) and the untorn net (21:11) show this oneness in John's gospel. The work of Jesus has been to gather the people, save them and unite them into one." (cited Sermon Starter on Homiletics Online, June 2, 2019.)

The text opens with a bit of a summary of all three sections. We read: "The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me."

Jesus prayed this prayer of unity not only for the disciples with him in that upper room, but for the church of the future, including HCOB, including you and me. There is no denying more of the people in our world need to see and know Jesus. With our media driven society, we cannot ignore the many tragedies of violence and wars, and all of the injustice attacking God's peace, security, and love in our country and in our world. We live in a world where people are overwhelmed with emotions of fear and anxiety. Many of these events shake the faith foundation of even the most devoted Christians.

We struggle to make sense of it all, but brothers and sisters, there is no making sense of this violence. It is evil. While we may feel safe in our cocoons of life, at least until something terrible happens, we cannot ignore the reality that evil is alive and running rampant all around the world. People **choose** the path of evil, for whatever reason, and inflict pain and suffering on others; sometimes, as a heinous monster for the whole world to see. It has been that way since

the days of Adam and Eve. And every time God, weeps. God weeps, because, once again, someone has chosen evil over Him.

Focusing on the text, we are reminded that Jesus had much to say to his disciples about what was to come in the future for him and for the disciples. He also had a lot to say about the state of the world then and in the future.

One example of this that we can read is in John 15:18-16:6. There Jesus spoke on matters concerning the world. He didn't paint a rosy picture for them. He already shared with them that the evil in the world would try to destroy him. And it wasn't going to get any easier for them; particularly as they continued his work to build God's kingdom. If it wasn't going to be a cake walk for them, why should we think it would be easy for us who seek to be faithful to the call of Christ on our lives. The world was a mess then, and Jesus knew some people throughout time would choose evil over the way, the truth, and the Life, meaning they would not choose to follow Jesus. And the world, as a whole, would suffer because of this.

Listen to these words from 15:18-19: "If you find the godless world is hating you, remember it got its start hating me. If you lived on the world's terms, the world would love you as one of its own. But since I picked you to live on God's terms and no longer on the world's terms, the world is going to hate you." I hear him saying that anything that is of God, all that is His goodness, is hated by the evil in the world. Isn't that what you hear?

And listen to these words spoken by Jesus in verses 21-25, "They," (the world), "are going to do all these things to you because of the way they treated me, **because they don't know the One who sent me.** If I hadn't come and told them all this in plain language, it wouldn't be so bad. As it is, they have no excuse. Hate me, hate my Father—it's all the same. If I hadn't done what I have done among them, work no one has ever done, they wouldn't be to blame. But they saw the God-signs and hated anyway, both me and my Father. Interesting—they have verified the truth of their own Scriptures where it is written, 'They hated me for no good reason.'"

Jesus then tells them briefly that the "Counselor," the Holy Spirit, will come to help them, and still the world will hate them. Jesus went on to say, intensifying the significance of the point he was already making in John 16:1-4a, "I've told you these things to prepare you for rough times ahead. They are going to throw you out of the meeting places. There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he's doing God a favor. They will do these things because they never really understood the Father. I've told you these things so that when the time comes and they start in on you, you'll be well-warned and ready for them."

Jesus knew the world was going to continue to be a mess. People always had and always would continue to choose to do horrible, unthinkable things to one another because they did not and do not yet know God. They may not know on their own account because they don't want to know. They may find the enticement of evil things to be more attractive to the life they want to live.

Or, unfortunately, not on their own choosing, they never heard about God and the loving kingdom He wants to build, including how to be a part of the kingdom. They may never have been touched by the presence of God's love, but instead, they may have only known the plagues of evil in their own lives.

All this is to say, and remind us, that from the beginning of time, God has given humanity free will, and there will always be those who will choose evil over good, for whatever reason. I believe, we were given free will because it is the only way we will ever truly know personally the love of God and how to love God, it is the only way we will be able to truly have an intimate

relationship with him, AND with each other. While this is no consolation for the victims of evil actions, it is reality.

So unfortunately, that means evil also has the ability to rear its ugly head. We don't like that. We say, stop the evil in our world, God, but some of humanity has already chosen. It wants its' own way sometimes. People turn their backs on God in order to have what they want, and sometimes it results with hurting others. If we are honest with ourselves, we know we all have made wrong choices at one time or another, choices for which we need to bring before God with a repentant heart.

Now, if you can imagine it's possible, there is a message of a hopeful solution to this warning of all the doom and gloom of the world. Beginning in John 16:7, Jesus reaffirms and explains to his disciples more about the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, who will come to help them after Jesus is physically gone from their presence. This same Great Spirit is available to us too.

Jesus' prayer here in John 17, offered for his disciples throughout all time, is that we will become one with him, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit. His prayer is that we will allow the Three-in-One to live in us making us one, filling us with God's amazing holiness and goodness. Yes, oneness with God and the Holy Spirit, also then strengthens our connectedness with one another.

Jesus knew and he wants us to know that this unity is crucial to the exercise of bringing hope, healing and change to the world. We, as believers, have heard the Good News of Jesus; and, through him we know God, there's no turning back from that, although we might choose to walk away. Woe to the one who makes that choice. We also have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to guide us and empower us to bring light and hope to this world that is broken and full of hatred.

When we cry out to God, "Why don't you do something to stop this?," He tells us that he already did, he created us and empowered us with his Spirit to help us. As we are one with the Holy Trinity, living in us, we make God real to our world. We bring hope and healing to the world by sharing God's touch and love through our words and deeds. We make God known to our world, even to those who may not want to hear or see God, **we are responsible** for presenting him to them. If Christians do not do it, no one likely will, and there will be no hope for our world.

We may not be able to prevent all bad things from happening, but we certainly must try to do what we can, beginning in our own churches, families, and neighborhoods. Our efforts may throw a monkey-wrench into the hurts or anger of one toying with the choice to do evil things. We may not know the plans people have made for doing, but we can confront all evil with God's presence and love living through us.

We cannot wait for someone else to fix the world for us. That would only be an endless wait, and Jesus makes it clear that waiting endlessly instead of answering the call **to make God known** to the world, is enabling evil to surge forward and be fruitful in winning converts. We know God because Jesus has made him known to us through his life, death, and resurrection. We have no excuse for avoiding what we can do to make Him known in our world. Making excuses, and this may sound harsh, means we have made a choice, to let evil have its' way.

So, while we lament over tragedies that occur, and the condition of our broken world, let us hold onto the unity we have with each other through the Spirit that lives in and through us; and may we recommit to sharing the presence and love of God through word and deed, wherever and whenever the opportunity arises. Let us pray that God will show us, as individuals and as a congregation, new ways needed to make this a reality.

June 1, 2025 - "Make Us One"

May we not only listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also follow through, trusting in the empowerment of the Spirit, to be the change that makes change happen. Let us never think that we can do nothing to help change the world; because sisters and brothers, that's simply not true, and Jesus says that. Amen.

We, brothers, and sisters are made one in spirit by God's love and grace and by the sacrifice our Savior Jesus made for us. We cling to Jesus to help us strengthen this bond, even as challenges arise for us in our churches. (Announce my retirement, effective May 31, 2026). Following Jesus' example, during the year ahead, we will want to be praying for the oneness of our church family, united in Christ, to be resilient to carry us through the process of finding a new pastor, AND, we need to begin praying now, for whoever that may be. You are a light to the community and strength for each other, and so it should continue to be. Amen.