

²⁰"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that 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. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,²³I 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.²⁴Father, 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.

²⁵"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I 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."

The word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

Jesus prays to the Father, "I ask...that they may all be one. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one...that they may become completely one."

You know, someone asked me this week if I would rather have Jesus talking to me or praying for me. Would you rather have Jesus talking to you, or praying for you? And I'd have to say, judging by this passage we just read, I'd say I would choose to have Jesus pray for me every day and twice on Sundays. You see, this passage comes in chapter 17 of John's gospel--we are about three quarters of the way through the Gospel. And at this point, we have seen a lot of people encounter

Jesus. He has had conversations with more than a handful of folks, and nearly every time Jesus talks to someone, that person gets confused.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night in chapter 3, and Jesus starts talking to him about being born from above. And Nicodemus is like, "I'm old! How am I supposed to be born?!"

Then, skip to the next chapter and you'll find Jesus totally confounding the woman he meets at the well. "I'll give you living water if you ask me," he tells her, and she says, "But you have no bucket, and the well is deep! What are you talking about?"

Jump again to chapter 10, where Jesus is talking to the Jewish leaders, telling them "I am the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep..." and he goes on and on about the sheep who listen to his voice and how he has sheep that don't belong to this fold, and the guys who are listening, it says they were *divided* because of his words--some were saying, "He has a demon! He's out of his mind!" And others were saying, "No, these aren't the words of a demon!"

The truth is, Jesus talks to people a LOT in the Gospel of John. He talks and he talks and he talks, and usually, the more he talks, the more people get confused. And frankly, a good portion of the time, I'm right there with them. But there's

only ONE TIME in this Gospel where Jesus prays. One time, here in chapter 17. And in Jesus' prayer, Jesus is crystal clear--he prays three times for the same thing, for one thing. Would you rather have Jesus talk to you or pray for you? If you're asking me, I'd go for the prayer. Jesus talks to people all the time, and he says all sorts of things, but if you want clarity--if you want to know what was important to Jesus in the hours just before he was arrested and taken away to his death--here, in his prayer, he finally gives us clarity. That they may be ONE. Jesus prays for unity.

In our political world here in the United States, during this election year, unity is suddenly the talk of the town. After a primary season that has sewn great division within political parties, now everyone is talking about unity. Will the republicans and the democrats be able to find their way to unity? Can they be united behind one candidate or another? Are they willing to stand together? Should they? Is the country itself divided, and if so, can those divisions be repaired?

Perhaps unity is the talk of your family, the ongoing conversation in your house. This week as I was thinking and preparing for this sermon, one day I was wondering where I was going to come up with an illustration that really showed what it means, what it looks like to struggle with unity, and then that afternoon I watched my children move from this wholesome spirit of cooperation and playing together to, within thirty seconds, looking like they were doing a reenactment of something out of Lord of the Flies. And I thought, "Well, there's that..."

Lord knows, in family life, unity is HARD. With people going this way and that way all day long, one to work and another to baseball practice and another to a meeting and another on a trip, with barely a chance to sit around the table and eat, how can we find unity when we are so seldom together?

This passage from John is a prayer of Jesus not just for his followers, but for those who will follow them, and those who will follow them, and the followers after that, and after that, and all the way down to us, generations of disciples that he prays for here. This passage is the reading assigned to be read on the Seventh Sunday of Easter every third year, what we call Year C in our Lectionary cycle, our church cycle of readings. And it just so happens that Year C falls this year, on the year when the United Methodist Church is gathering for our General Conference, for the 10 day period that comes around every four years, when delegates from all over the world will gather to worship, and pray, and make decisions about how we as a worldwide church body will be governed. And it just so happens that this particular year, Easter came a bit early, and General Conference was scheduled a bit late, and so it just, I don't know, maybe by coincidence or maybe not, but it just so happens that by all of these things falling into place, today, just 2 days before our General Conference is convened, we happen to be assigned to read, and study, and consider Jesus' prayer for unity.

And undoubtedly the media coverage these next two weeks will pose the question many are already asking: Can the United Methodist Church stay United? Or will the rifts in the church, disagreements over theology and human sexuality, will these fault lines rupture into canyons, too deep to be repaired? If the church changes, can we stay together? If the church doesn't change, can we stay together? Is unity possible?

Is real unity possible? Can it happen? Can a group of people, a church, a family, or any two people for that matter, ever be truly united?

Jesus' prayer shows us that the answer is a resounding YES...But it may not be the yes we are looking for. The unity that Jesus prays for is not a unity that we can gain ourselves. It's not a unity that we can strong-arm or force; it's not a unity born of getting our own way; it's not a unity that we can muster up on our own. There is a reason why Jesus prays to God the father for us to have unity, and the reason is because it is a gift. Jesus prays for us to be united with God and with one another, for us to share the very kind of unity that exists within God. This is a tenacious unity--a unity that takes three and makes one--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God. It is not something we can produce; it may not even be something we can understand; it is only something we can receive. It is a costly unity. It is made possible by the very next moments, the very next verses we read in the Gospel--when Jesus goes out from that place, and gives himself up, to be tried, and flogged, and mocked, and crucified. It is to this Christ, this God, that we are

united, and Paul promises that if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

This unity we are given extends to every level, to every relationship--with our spouses, with our parents and our children, with our churches, in our communities, our nation, and our world--we cannot find unity, we cannot agree until we reach the foot of the cross, and we lay down what we have been carrying, and receive the grace that flows from that place--the grace that has power to heal the hurts and the divisions of the past; the grace that has power to change our hearts and our minds; the grace that has the power to overcome any obstacle, all in order that the world might know this God, who has given himself up for us.

So it is that grace that carries us into a new week--to live and seek the unity that Jesus prayed for, to surrender ourselves and our agendas, our desires, to lose ourselves in God, and in the moments when we find God, to discover new life again.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.