

**May 20, 2007**  
**Acts 16:25-34, John 17:20-26**  
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**Second Presbyterian Church**

*[Our gospel reading comes this morning from John 17:20-26. This is the final section of Jesus' great prayer before his betrayal and arrest. Jesus is praying a great prayer to God, on behalf of his disciples. In this last part of his prayer, he widens the circle of those he holds in prayer:]*

Is this prayer beautiful to you? You are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...does it bring comfort? It might. These beautiful words: believe, oneness, desire, love. A poem whose rhythm can lull us into a glorious imagining of heaven, of the foundations of the world, of ultimate union with God—Christ in us, we in Christ. This is the culmination not only of Jesus' great prayer, but also the final words that fill the upper room. It's a long night that began with supper and a curious foot washing. In this same night, Jesus gave the new commandment to his disciples; that they love one another just as he has loved them. By this time in the evening, Judas has left to start the plan for betrayal in motion. Jesus says a lot more on this night, and the hours are wearing thin. What to make of this midnight prayer? What must have the disciples have thought?

I wonder if it did not sound so lovely to them. Was it a verbal stream of consciousness, a prayer in which Jesus prayed with the fervor of a man who knows just how little time he has left? A friend of mine wondered, when we were talking about this passage, whether Jesus might have even sounded crazy, because his prayer begins to run in circles, faster and faster, circling back and in on itself.

For those of us who admire the beauty, or even the confusing circularity of this prayer, it is a scandal to speak too long about it before naming the nagging problem. A problem that we can't ignore much longer in talking about this prayer: Jesus' prayer has not been answered. "That they may all be one?" Maybe it sounded realistic to the ears of the disciples overhearing these holy utterances. But now, here in 2007, it's a scandalous prayer to our ears. It's hard to think very long about this passage looking at the evidence to the contrary all around us.

The church speaks of unity but, without spelling out what is apparent by a simple drive down our city streets or by a quick read from Presbyterian News Service, we spend an awful lot of time debating our differences rather than declaring our oneness. While this congregation has done admirably well in its unity, it's impossible to brush away the creeping feeling that we as Christians are getting no closer to this unity that is so poetically petitioned by Jesus in this final prayer. To say the least, today's world would not probably think of the institutional church as a place to look for models of unity.

Shall we just give up then? That is what some have done. It's difficult to keep on sometimes in the face of conflict or disappointment, either with problems in the church or challenges in the world. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr warned against romantic idealism and fatalistic despair when facing seemingly insurmountable disconnections. He said, "The fact is that no one who looks at the facts of contemporary society from any high or even decent moral perspective can be an optimist, and no one who tries to meet its moral problems can be a complete pessimist. Moral energy creates its own optimism . . . But [Jesus] did believe that God would bring ultimate victory."

So, without fooling ourselves, but without losing hope, how do we speak of the challenge of unity? This is the seventh Sunday of Easter. We hold up the promise of the resurrection, of Christ not abandoning the world, but promising to live within it; for the Spirit to live within us. How else can we explain the hope of Easter people lasting 2,000 years past the empty tomb but the work of a living God among us?

What we can do, what we must do, is witness to the presence of Christ's spirit, the answers to Christ's prayer that are there when we see with the eyes of faith. As some of you might know, I am finishing two years of ministry with you here at Second; my first two years of ordained ministry. I am privileged to have been able to witness the real work of Christ and

unity in Christ within this community. While I can't give you a full account, here are some moments I will not forget, when the unity of Christ became real.

When a church member suffering from a long illness joined my prayer for him by his own prayer for the people in his nursing facility and for the hungry people in the world.

During a foot washing at Second at Six, when a member told me how she had washed her own husband's feet just two hours before his death.

Within the high school seniors in Footsteps of Faith, who gave testimony in class this year to God's work in their lives and their own struggles with faith.

I witnessed answers to Christ's prayer, that we may be one, through God—through God's love.

These are particular stories, and each of us has our own. We know they don't all add up to the full unity of the world with God, but they are real, and true experiences of being bound together by Christ. And the Bible is built on stories of the particular. Stories about specific people and specific places where it had to be told that God showed up and God's love is real. Real, and stronger than violence, family brokenness or imprisonment. God's love for people and desire for their preservation and wholeness circled about even in awful times of wandering and war, loneliness and starvation: Unity can occur; unity in love and faith in Jesus Christ.

Take the story that our lay readers read this morning in Acts: Paul and Silas in are in jail, not in despair over their desperate situation, but praying and singing midnight hymns to God, for they know that God has not abandoned them, they believe that God is the God of love and of divine action. They experience, in a very real way, release of God's power, not just in their freedom, but by their extension of new life in Christ to the jailer. And in God's love overflowing, we see their unity in this story of forgiveness, of transformation. Unity that shows itself not just in spiritual care for others, but in physical care for others. This new Christian's first act of faith was binding up the wounds of Paul and Silas. Hours before they were strangers, those whom were the powers of the day had charged him to imprison. Now they experienced unity in Christ stronger than chains, stronger than Roman law.

Christ prayed that we may have unity in love, in the love of God. And so, it may be our character of love, and not our correctness, that is our greatest witness to the world. If that character is always rooted in the Christ who has promised to abide in us, how much more hopeful we might look to the world. For a hopeful witness, it is more than carefully worded prayer. It is our love for one another. More than our striving to be right, it is our desire to be the vessels of God's love. More than overcoming being "against the world," it is to answer the call to be in it—in the great hope of Jesus—that there are always more who will come to believe. To believe is not to sign up for specifics, but to be caught up in the ever-widening circles of hope and love that Jesus prays for. And to be united, more than anything else, by the overflowing love of God.

Unity is not that we agree on everything. Unity is that we are spinning around the same God, that we pray to understand the depth of God's love for and connection to us, that we answer God's desire that we hold one another in prayer, that we love one another. We gather strength by the knowledge and expression of our unity here, so that we can better express the love of God wherever we find ourselves outside these walls.

In her book *Breathing Spaces*, Lutheran pastor and writer Heidi Neumark tells about one of her parishioners, Felipe, who was badly injured in one of the World Trade Towers on September 11. She visited him day after day talking to him, praying over him, reading Psalms, never knowing whether Felipe heard her words in his medicated stillness. She brought in a tape recording of his young children with their voices greeting him. She played it for weeks. Finally, Felipe said one day, "Thank you." Neumark sums up the experience this way, "Connection is everything. Relationship to God and to each other is life itself."

It is life itself. And this is what Jesus prays for us: life in God, life with one another. The circles of his prayer are growing. May you feel them pulling you to God. May you know the great hope in a prayer meant for us, for you and for me. We are the ones who have come to believe, and we are surrounded by--and will be followed by--those who will come to believe. As we are caught up in Jesus' circles of prayer, may we be know and believe that we are all the answer to Jesus' prayer as well.