

Glory and Love and Prayer

John 17:20-26

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Jesus closes his Farewell Discourse, delivered at the Last Supper, when he is surrounded by his followers the evening before he is arrested, with prayer. Jesus asks for God to glorify him so that he might glorify God. Then he asks for God to protect those who have believed. Finally he asks for unity, “that they may all be one.”

This passage of scripture is familiar to us in the United Church of Christ, for it is our motto. It was the hope and the dream of those who founded this denomination that the divisions that separate Christians from one another might come to an end and that together we could bear witness to God’s glory and love.

Though it wasn’t until 1957 that the merger between the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church was completed, creating the United Church of Christ, the movement to merge dates from decades before. And that movement was a powerful witness. In the midst of the Second World War, one denomination which was largely composed of the old WASP establishment committed to joining with another denomination composed primarily of German immigrants. And they took as their motto, in the midst of the worst war this world has ever seen, this prayer of Jesus “that they may all be one.”

My favourite theologian is the baptist James McClendon and at the close of the second volume of his systematic theology he discusses, with great exuberance, this unity. What is the purpose of creation? Why does everything exist? What is the mission of God? What is the goal of redemption? What is the work of the Holy Spirit? All of those questions can be answered by union, or what McClendon calls ecstatic fellowship. What the old hymn calls “what a fellowship, what a joy divine.” It is the “bringing of the divine self and human selves [and the rest of the creation] into an unspeakable, ecstatic intimacy.”

And this is such a radically beautiful vision. The goal of the creation is not to judge between the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous. The end to which we are inexorably drawn is not a division of peoples. Salvation does not separate out those who are “in” from those who are “out.” Rather, every single thing that God does and has ever done is working toward the ultimate goal of the ecstatic fellowship of all existence.

According to Jesus’ prayer the church is God’s agent, given the responsibility and the joy of cooperating with God to bring that vision to fulfillment.

And, yet . . .

. . . As even McClendon himself writes:

If fellowship is the true genius of authentic Christian community, what reason have we to be hopeful even about our own churches? Is not one feature of all human existence on this planet, religious or other, the persistent enmity that not only divides human communities from one another but rends them within? And has the church been any different in this regard? Have not church folk rather persistently been part of the old quarrels between people and races and classes and sexes, been party to them, even been provokers of them?

And, of course, we must answer, “Yes, she has.”

Jesus was astutely aware of human nature and the possibility that the church would not live up to its calling, that she would rend asunder in divisions and disagreements. If it did so, then God’s entire creation project would be endangered. The work of the creation and the redemption could slip back into chaos. And so his prayer contains a few clues in how to make this unity work. It is not simply a beautiful dream; it is a challenging ethic that lures us into the grand adventure of God’s mission on earth.

Let us first be clear that the unity is not supposed to be imposed upon the world, which is what happened so often in the imperial and colonial missions of European Christianity. Rather, the world is supposed to be drawn to unity because they see in the church a radically different and wonderful way of living.

And thus, attending to the community is an essential task of mission. In his commentary on this passage, William Herzog, New Testament professor at Andover Newton Theological Seminary, writes:

. . . the community itself is missional. Therefore, to attend to the well-being of the community is part of its mission to the world, and to nurture its unity is a form of witness to a divided world. Nurturing healthy communal life is an expression of an outgoing mission. The two imply each other.

What shape must our community life take, then?

For one thing, it must participate in the glory of God as revealed in Jesus. Notice that in verse 22 Jesus says, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.” The unity we are drawn to is achieved by sharing in the glory. But what is the glory?

Generally in the Bible, God’s glory is a radiant presence, but in the Gospel of John that radiant presence is equated with a very specific series of events. Whenever this gospel discusses the glorification of Jesus, it is referring to his death, burial, and rising again. And, so, the radiant, beautiful, powerful presence of God is beheld in the cross and the resurrection. Our community, therefore, is to be shaped by participating in this glory. Our community takes on a cruciform shape. Our ethics and identity are rooted in this narrative.

And that has many implications—for how we treat other people, for how we treat the earth, for how we spend our money, and more. For we are a people who see victory not in military triumph but in sacrificial love. We are a people who challenge the powers-that-be by offering our bodies as witnesses. We are a people willing to suffer the costs in order to achieve

the grander goal. And, for a specific example, we are a people who in the midst of war seek unity with those whom others might perceive as the enemy.

The union that God desires for all creation is not political union. It is not economic union. It is definitely not racial or cultural or ethnic purification. It is not even religious or doctrinal union. In fact, I don't think the idea is even that all humans would become members of the Christian faith. As one commentator I studied wrote, "this prayer is for unity that grows out of the *love* of God, received and shared." Another pointed out that in these six verses Jesus says that love is "the bond within the Godhead, the divine gift to the disciples, the magnetic grace through which God seeks to attract the world, and the ingredient that the Lord prays will be within his followers." And a third commentator wrote that "The unity for which Jesus prays is founded in reciprocal love, the kind of self-giving love seen in the life of Jesus. This mutual and reciprocal love is the kind of love that is as much a decision and choice as it is a feeling."

Authentic love that makes us vulnerable, that relies upon others, that gives of ourselves, that kind of love, Jesus kind of love, is what ultimately creates the divine fellowship. And that kind of love doesn't care about borders and boundaries. It doesn't require political agreement or doctrinal conformity. It even reaches out to enemies and those we dislike. And it isn't naïve or passive. It is active world-changing love of a Mahatma Gandhi, a Martin Luther King, a Nelson Mandela.

But, we aren't always great at that kind of love. In fact, our human track record and the track record of the church simply stinks. And right now with conflict in the South China Sea, in the Ukraine, in Syria, and in Nigeria and all over the place really, can this, even in the very long term, work? Can we all be one?

And so the final clue Jesus gives us in this prayer is the prayer itself. Yes, we must create a community shaped by the cruciform glory of Jesus. Yes, we must learn to practice an ethic of love. But even these goals will only be achieved if we pray. For there is some power in prayer. Maybe it invites divine action or maybe it changes us. Maybe it rewires our brains in such a way that we become different people—more empathetic, gentler, kinder, more loving and generous and bold. Surely the routine utterance of "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" at least provokes us to imagine what that reality might look like.

Glory, love, and prayer. These can shape us as a local church and as a local church, we can bear witness to our community. And in fellowship with others shaped the same we can bear witness to the state and region and to the nation and to the world. Sure it's a dream, but don't you want to dream big.

On Wednesday night, near midnight, one of my dearest high school friends, who was having a difficult week, e-mailed me "Man I hope there is still 'good' in this world."

I responded, "There is. Omaha raised over \$6 million dollars in one day on Wednesday for over 500 non-profits."

And maybe, just maybe, this example also responds in its limited way to that question James McClendon posed --"What reason have we to be hopeful [that they may all be one]?" Maybe Wednesday's Omaha Gives campaign is reason to be hopeful. Sure, there wasn't religious, political, or cultural agreement expressed on that day. But, there doesn't have to be. Plurality and diversity and the pizzazz of difference are essential elements of the unity that God

seeks. But maybe the overwhelming generosity revealed a deep feeling for one another. Maybe it's the kind of love that can bind a community together. Maybe, just maybe, it is evidence of the Holy Spirit at work.

So, let's look for the signs, even the little signs of God at work in our world. And let's dream big, entering into the grand adventure of God's mission on earth. And let's claim this prayer of Jesus, as shaping our identity and our witness.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I 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.