

Sermon- The Unity of Christ Followers

Scripture: John 17:10-12

Sunday, September 20, 2020

This is our fourth sermon in Jesus' High priestly prayer. First we looked at the deeper insights we get from this prayer about the Trinity, and the meaning of salvation. Then we wrestled with the difference in Disciple DNA that demonstrates a unique capacity to believing and accepting the revelation of God the Father through Jesus His Son followed by the process of getting to know the Trinity and finally the power to keep God's word.

But Jesus knows that there is a big challenge coming. As He anticipates His leaving the earth, He knows that his disciples are going to get attacked and specifically the bonds between them making unity a challenge. That is what we are going to look at today.

First let's look at how Jesus prays in these 3 verses we are looking at. Our passage starts with these words, "***All who are mine belong to you, and you have given them to me, so they bring me glory***". So the first thing you get to see in this passage is the unity of the Father and Son. You never hear Jesus saying to his heavenly Father, these are mine and those are yours. Within the Trinity, everyone in God's kingdom belongs to the Father and everything that belongs to the Father has been given to the Son. So the Son works for the interests of the Father and the Father works for the interests of the Son. Right there you see a big difference between how our world operates and how the Trinity operates.

Then Jesus prays, "I am coming to you but they, the disciples are staying in the world", so, "protect them by the power of your name after I am gone". Jesus goes on to tell his father that protecting his disciples' unity is what he was doing when he was with them. The exception of course was Judas. But we are not going to dwell on him today. Anyway now you know why Jesus' disciples never broke apart into different factions when Jesus was on earth. He was specifically protecting them from this happening.

But here is the problem. After Jesus left, there seems to be nothing but disunity. When you look at denominations, we have 30,000 globally and 1200 in the US. Then these denominations themselves are further split into sub-groups. This number grows so fast that it is hard to keep track.

What are the reason for so many groups? Some are theological reasons. The Catholics believe for example that when it comes to **authority** in the church, there are three legs, scripture, tradition and the magisterium or the popes. So divine revelation for them is the scripture and tradition, while interpreting this divine revelation is only given to the office of the magisterium which is the pope and the bishops. The reformed churches believe that the Bible is the sole authority in the church. But that does not mean tradition is not important to the protestant churches. For example the traditional creeds are recited in all churches. And we have our Confessions, which are faith statements. But the understanding in the protestant church is that these statements are placed in a serving role and not an authoritative role on par with Scripture. There are a million issues like this that can easily make your head spin.

But churches have divisions not only for theological reasons. Many divisions are based on ecclesiological reasons. That means “church government”. For example, should churches have a hierarchy with Bishops and pastors, where the authority flows from the top or should it be congregational, where the authority flows from the congregation. There are many options in between but again my goal is to make sure we all don’t get dizzy before I am through here 😊

Some divisions are based on simply ethnicity and language. We have not just white churches and black churches, we have churches representing individual language groups. Then within the denominational groups and all the ethnic groups there further divisions based on individual factions. No matter what, some people will follow Peter

and others will want to follow Paul. So finally when you drill it all down you have quite a mosaic on your hands.

So the question is, what happened to Jesus' prayer for unity for the disciples to come? Here is my take on it. When you look beyond the surface you see some divisions are not really divisions. Just because there is a Congolese church on one side of Metropolitan Ave and a Mennonite church on the other side of Metropolitan Ave, does not mean we are divided. We may speak different languages but the fact is that we worship the same God, in the same spirit. We may not worship together because it is not practical to do so but it is amazing that God has made an arrangement for the Congolese to worship Him in a language they are familiar with and the Mennonites also get to worship Him in a language that we know. Besides this, tomorrow is there is any need that they have I am sure we will rally to help them and I am quite sure they will rally to help us if we are in need. Beyond that in this area we have the Catholics, the Lutherans, the Christians, the Methodists and the Presbyterians all coming together to worship through the Lenten season as well as the Thanksgiving celebration. Now granted this co-operation is not very common, but the point is, if the Argentine churches can do it, why could not any set of churches across denominational lines anywhere? And actually when you worship in other styles you do find that each denomination brings a different kind of beauty to the worship. I believe that the kingdom of God is so big that in human terms it is hard for us to capture all aspects of the kingdom of God. So God has arranged the Methodists to emphasize some aspects of it, the Lutherans some of it and the Mennonites some of it. Beyond that the different languages and cultures hold their own corners of the beauty in worship. So when God looks at the universal church He is able to see all aspects of the kingdom of God emphasized and all kinds of beauty in worship being contributed from different corners of the earth.

There is another kind of unity there is among the churches that you only realize when you are involved on the mission field. Now mission organizations like ISI have staff and volunteers across all denominational lines. They all have to sign onto the faith statement of the organization. Yet we have churches of all kinds of Protestant denominations as part of the organization. Pastor Mervin too has shared from his Haiti days that he used to be working with all sorts of denominations there. So when it comes to missions, there is a great sense of unity across denominational lines. On the mission field there is a high level of co-operation with each denomination and organization contributing their resources to the common goal with great urgency so that the church is able to expand the kingdom of God in amazing ways. In other words, the different groups within the universal church are not divisions but incarnations of the kingdom of God within the many unique cultures of the world and serve a great purpose in kingdom of God emphasis, worship and missions. In other words, some divisions are not real divisions!

Having said that, I don't want to gloss over the real and destructive divisions that do exist within the church. There are divisions in the larger church based on theological issues that are minor, but we do make it major. For example some churches believe that baptism is only real if a person is immersed in the water and not sprinkled. Now I do understand that the "dying to the old and being reborn in Christ" is best symbolized by immersion. But what if you are in a situation where you do not have a pond, river or pool where you could do a full immersion baptism? If you use less water does that change the meaning of the act? That is like saying if you use grape juice instead of wine, you are not participating in a real communion because Jesus said nothing about grape juice! It may sound silly but there are hundreds of issues like this that have split small local churches and whole national denominations and everything in between. In Titus 3:9 Apostle Paul says, ***"Do not get involved in foolish discussions about spiritual***

pedigrees^[a] or in quarrels and fights about obedience to Jewish laws. These things are useless and a waste of time.”

And it is not just theological issues that have caused divisions in the church. James 4:1-2 says, ***“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.”*** This sounds a lot more intense than something we see in our circles and that is the power of Jesus’ prayer over us. But we can never be complacent and say, this will never happen to us. Because the divisions James 4 is referring to are created by many issues from the way scripture is interpreted to personality cults within the church. These divisions become destructive when they become political power struggles. The way it works is that a faction can form within a church over almost any issue. These factions want something that it does not have and they start a power struggle to get what they want.

At this point, they stop acting as Jesus’ disciples. What is the result? There are three consequences to being divided.

Firstly, a divided community is a self-absorbed community and therefore ineffective in mission. When you are focused on fighting internally, you just don’t have the time or mental resources to focus on the task of extending the kingdom outward. Sowing an internal division is the oldest trick in the book but in spite of this, it remains surprisingly effective, because our flesh can always be tricked to fall for a personal grievance and go into a perceived “self-protective mode”. When we are tricked into trying to protect our self, our eyes instantly are taken off our mission.

Secondly, when you are a divided community, you look too much like the outside world to be salt and light. A divided community is a community that has become conforming

rather than non-confirming to the outside world. When you are a conforming society, then you have lost your capacity to influence the larger society. You have become an organization that is influenced by world. That conformed community is like a piece of driftwood that is going to go where the current takes it rather than a ship that is going on its own power to the destination of its choosing.

Thirdly, Jesus puts it this way in John. He said a house divided cannot stand. A divided community is a weak community. A weak community can disintegrate and disappear if it becomes weak enough. So for the devil, sowing divisions in the local church is a surest way to threaten its very existence.

So how do we make sure we are the powered ship on a mission rather than a piece of driftwood? How do we make sure that we are the recipients of the power of this prayer of Jesus? There are three things that I will forward to you that are principles from the Bible.

The first is the Ps 1 principle which states that God watches over the righteous. What does that mean. It means that if we care to follow God's will by walking on the path that he wants us to walk on then he will protect us from the schemes of the enemy. ***"Oh, the joys of those who do not***

***follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners,
or join in with mockers.***

***² But they delight in the law of the Lord,
meditating on it day and night.***

***³ They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season.***

***Their leaves never wither,
and they prosper in all they do.***

⁴ But not the wicked!

They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind”.

What that means is this. If you want God to watch out for you, you have to be willing to stay on the path that he wants you on. Now God watching out for you does not mean protecting you from difficulties. That is what the prosperity Gospel people get wrong. They say, if you believe in Jesus you will have everything going well and nothing bad will ever happen. How does “nothing bad will ever happen” align with “pick up your cross and follow me”? On the other hand, if you are willing to stay on the difficult but spiritually protected path, Jesus Christ promises us that, while we are on God’s path, all the enemy’s devices and schemes thrown at us, including being tricked into a false self-preservation mode that injures our relationships with our fellow believers will not succeed. On the path of Jesus Christ, we will be protected from the tricks of the devil. This is true at the individual level.

But we are also meditating today on what that looks like in the local church. There are many ways to mess a church up but today we are focusing specifically on Jesus’ prayer for unity. So in the church the scheme we face is the devil trying to create factions among us so that we will not be able to execute our mission. So what is the path we need to stay on to be protected from the devils schemes as a church?

The biblical analogy of the church as the body is very helpful in this case. In this analogy, each of us are supposed to be an organ within the body that serves the whole. The heart is not pumping blood just for itself and the stomach is not going to digest all that food and keep it to itself. If it did it would kill the body and when the body died, it would die as well. We will always face temptations to what to do things our own way and think that we have to protect ourself. The enemy fuels the self-protective mode by telling us to guard our power, our way and our rights and our this and our that. But if we step back and think of “our church” as “God’s church” first and we are an organ in his body

that changes a lot of things for us. If we approach this as we are an organ and not some faction, then we can think of how our contribution can be better for the whole and not just for us. That will remove arguments and quarrels and help us to respect and love each other and move forward thinking of everyone's benefit not just the benefit of our group.

That is what is meant by walking the righteous path as a whole church. And when we do that manifesting all the fruits of the spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, longsuffering and self-control, then we will be able to experience the power of God watching out for us. Then no matter what Satan may throw at us, we will endure and glow and further God's kingdom and bring Him honor and glory.

May our church find ourselves protected every moment from every kind of division by the power of the name of Jesus Christ and continue our march against all the forces of evil that keep people in darkness in these parts and where ever God takes us.